THE LITTLE MERMAID REIMAGINED

CRIMSON COLLAR

EMERSON ROSEWOOD

THE LITTLE MERMAID REIMAGINED

CRIMSON COLLAR

EMERSON ROSEWOOD

The littlest siren, Leira, embarks on a mission to capture a demon for the sea kingdom's yearly harvest. Her plans go awry when she inadvertently brings a vampire prince into Lunaris instead. Resentful of the exiled Sea Witch's hold on his father's throne, Prince Draven sees an opportunity for revenge and manipulation, and uses Leira to turn the tide in his favor. As the balance of power shifts and circumstances evolve, Leira and Draven navigate escalating tensions, resulting in an uneasy alliance and attraction between foes.

Crimson Collar
Copyright © 2024 by Emerson Rosewood
All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in book reviews and articles.

For information, email Everly Reads.
everlyreads@gmail.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Cover by Emrys Pumpkin Press
First ebook edition, 2024
04.24

Thank you, dear reader, for opening these pages.

Reimagined Tales by Emerson Rosewood

Bitten by the Vampire: Pride and Prejudice Reimagined
Crimson Collar: The Little Mermaid Reimagined

Contents

Chapter 1
The Siren
Chapter 2
The Siren
Chapter 3
The Vampire
Chapter 4
The Vampire
Chapter 5
Draven
Chapter 6
Leira
Chapter 7
Draven
Chapter 8
Leira
Chapter 9
Draven
Chapter 10
Leira
Chapter 11
Draven
Chapter 12
Leira
Chapter 13
Leira
Chapter 14
Leira
Chapter 15
Draven
Chapter 16
Leira
Chapter 17
Draven
Chapter 18
Leira
Chapter 19
Leira
Chapter 20
Draven
Chapter 21
Draven
Chapter 22
Leira
Chapter 23
Draven
Chapter 24
Leira

Chapter 25
Draven
Chapter 26
Leira
Chapter 27
Draven
Chapter 28
Leira
Chapter 29
Draven
Chapter 30
Draven
Chapter 31
Leira
Chapter 32
Leira
Chapter 33
Leira
Chapter 34
Draven
Chapter 35
Leira
Chapter 36
Leira
Chapter 37
Draven
Thank You
What to Read Next
Another Great Read
Stay Connected
Discover More from Everly Reads
About the Author

Chapter 1
The Siren

I creep ashore through the murmuring surf, the sand scraping along my forearms and navel as my serpentine tail propels me toward the shelter of a rocky outcropping. Chilling foam rolls over my shoulders, brushing my wave of hair into a clinging shroud. With my mouth submerged, I steadily draw seawater into my lungs to calm my racing heart.

I'm on the shore. For the first time.

I'm ready for this. I've trained.

I have no fear.

I soak my lungs in seawater again, relishing the heightened awareness as my senses home in on my surroundings.

There, in the silvery glow of the moon, is exactly what I hope I'm seeking. A bipedal creature saunters across the bone-white grains higher on the beach, only a dozen cubits away. Its cloak of apparel a long obsidian hide. Its barren chest is wide and chiseled, powerful, like my siren brothers'.

It's male then.

Unlike my brothers, this creature wears what I understand to be linen wrapping his legs. I blink as I try to understand how the material moves with his footfalls and does not chafe his flesh.

Our men have no need for such an encumbrance. No material to bunch when hunting. Just smooth scales that allow them to slip through the water. And when on two legs, as striders, their moist flesh glides over itself effortlessly.

My own scales, like cascading shells, protect most of my hide, surging up from my thick tail and around my hips, flecking in a pattern like spiraling shells over the ridges and swells of my body and across my collarbones and raining in rivulets down my arms, leaving areas of exposed hide—

Which I'm told is appealing to the land creatures.

Is that why this creature bares his scaleless chest instead of covering it? Does he hope to attract a mate?

I do not know their mating customs.

In place of an alluring pattern of scales, he has ashy-colored hair that looks like dead and dying moss kelp emblazoned across his pale chest, highlighting two darker round circles on each pectoral. I almost giggle at the absurdity of them.

What are the circles for?

I'm then reminded of my lessons. Some land dwellers nurse their young.

But he is male. Does he feed his kin from those knobby protrusions? I thought only females did that.

I smirk.

I cock my head as I study his staggering form. Pockets of unruly sand trip him up. I'm mesmerized as his toes sink below the surface, only to free themselves over and over.

He's grumbling to himself and scowling.

His dark brows are shaped into a troubling V.

Along with the briny scent as the wind tickles along my forehead, I catch the peculiar odors of land creatures. A sand crab no bigger than my webbed thumb scuttles a short distance from the foamy waves, out on some nighttime errand. Several beetles race across dry sand, followed by a troop of sand fleas.

The male creature lifts his chin and sniffs the air, making me draw back into the surf to hide my presence. His body stiffens then as he turns, his focus suddenly riveted.

I peer down the beach just past the jetty, where his attention has gone.

Oh! Another bipedal. This one has a long braid of hair draped down its back, and a sheath of fabric skimming its body down to a set of bony knees. Two mounds of flesh swell the front of her garment, telling me this is a female.

The one who would feed her young. The enlarged milk sacs make more sense.

A ring of glowing red rims around her throat. A collar of some sort, which does not allow her to remain inconspicuous.

The male drops into a crouch and studies her, as I study both of them.

A curious sound bubbles from the woman's throat.

Weeping. She's weeping, swiping at the water that drips from her eyes.

Tears.

My mouth parts. Tears. This female can make tears.

My brothers and sisters can feel sorrow, but we cannot make tears.

I slither forward, daring to lift my shoulders from the sea to examine these creatures better.

Her ankles breach the surf. She keeps moving until her knees are buried in the rolling waves, and still ventures deeper, sobbing and hiccuping and twisting her hands together.

"Oi!"

I jerk.

The male, having called out, has risen to his feet, and sprints toward the female, after first shedding his heavy leather and leaving it in the sand.

"Hey there, love!" he shouts. "You don't want to be doing that."

She shrieks and presses her way into the water. The waves have grown in anger and slap her torso, but still she shrieks and fights the ocean.

The male charges forward with giant, prancing steps over the waves, his naked skin a beacon under the moonlight, until he reaches the female and grabs her arm. She battles him as he pulls her onto the beach.

"Stop that now, girlie! Cut it out." He throws her in the sand, falls on top of her, and pins her arms beside her head.

As the surf rolls up and over their lower halves, her legs continue to thrash under him until he grabs her chin and forces her to look at him.

He looks deeply into her eyes. "Be still, little bird. You're safe."

Her body goes limp.

My heartbeat skips. My lungs constrict, forcing water from them that dribbles down my chin.

He told her to behave, and she listened.

He has magic.

"Were you going to drown yourself?" he asks.

Her lips quiver.

"Now what did you think going and doing something as stupid as drowning yourself would accomplish?"

The girl's chest heaves under him, but she remains silent.

His words spill from hypnotically defined lips. "I don't care what troubles you've got, but giving up like this is no way to go."

Glistening tears trail down her temples. The pair paints an intriguing picture I work to understand—as the surf toys with tendrils of her brown hair and the moon combs his pearly-colored mane into ribbons of light. From where I am, I can see dots of salt water on his eyelashes and nose.

She would have died, I remind myself. She can't breathe underwater.

He saved her.

Her collar pulses, drawing the eye of the male. "Whose crimson are you? They'll be looking for a drink, love."

The girl whimpers and shakes her head.

The male smooths his hands over her shoulders, her arms, as if inspecting her skin. His fingers stop on her clavicles, and he mutters a harsh swear. "He's a real jerk, huh? Does he always bruise you? Who is it? I'll knock some sense into him."

She continues to wag her head side to side.

The male, dripping with water, his restrictive garments clinging to his thighs and hips, slides back off the girl and helps her sit up. "Look, love, you're gonna have to go back, but how about I take a turn, and you won't be crimson. They'll blame it on illness, and you'll have more time before the prick has to feed again. I won't hurt you. I'll be gentle."

The girl slides away, her knees to her chest.

The male crouches low and tips her chin up. "I promise I'm good on my word."

She nods and extends her wrist.

"That's a good girl."

Two of his pointed front teeth grow into pronounced white tusks—no—fangs. They grow into fangs. He leans down and pierces with ease the flesh of her forearm.

In Lunaris, sirens do not have such flimsy flesh. His fangs would have to work a lot harder to sink into my thick hide. Even after emerging through the dome around the kingdom and shifting into our terrestrial two-footed forms, the pools dotting the landscape and our hide's own silky secretions keep our flesh damp and glistening and protected in a way the creatures in the "land above the sea" are without.

The male rounds over her appendage, suckling her flesh in earnest.

For just a moment, he looks up, his chest swelling, his face turned in my direction, his gaze unfocused as he licks the blood from his lips.

His eyes are black, lifeless pools.

A soulless creature.

With magic.

Feeding on the life force of another being.

I don't have to look any further. He is exactly what I need for King Nereus's harvest.

Chapter 2
The Siren

Blood runs down the girl's forearm and drips onto the wet sand. She doesn't seem frightened now. No. She's compliant. Trusting.

That's interesting.

Blood sustains life. These creatures, like sirens, depend on it for their existence. They need it to flow through their veins or death comes.

Does he plan to drain her? Kill her?

Why would she be so calm? So willing?

Whatever his plan, whatever her reasons, they are both distracted. The roar of the waves creates camouflage I'll need. Now is the time to act.

As the male presses his lips to her fragile skin, I rise onto my forearms and curl my tail around me, calling on the power in my central nexus scale. The sternal scale, as big as the meat of my thumb, sends tingles that ripple from my chest and intensify into torturous throbs in my appendages. I bite my lip to keep from crying out as my beautiful tail cleaves in two and the bones and muscles split and reform into separate limbs.

The cooling surf numbs the unavoidable sting as my newly formed round bottom sinks into the sand. My internal anatomy adjusts, rejecting the seawater in my lungs. As I spew it from my mouth, the burn of air takes its place while my dorsal and pelvic fins dissolve and the webbing of my fingers disintegrates.

I cough as I draw my legs under me, until I'm kneeling and gasping fresh air, trying to compose myself.

The land change is always difficult, but not under the sea. The aqua veil around Lunaris allows for a painless shift.

I resemble the form these creatures would call pleasing, but I am still not the same, a hybrid of flesh and protective scales.

I stretch and flex. The muscles in my legs are strong. My arms and shoulders contoured and sinuous. I am not inexperienced in this form. From my youth, I've trained without ceasing back home in Lunaris. Our warrior clan is always prepared for intruders, from the sea or land.

Now that I am acclimated, with a single, powerful thrust, I catapult myself over the jetty and land a few feet from the male and female.

He tears his mouth away from the female, her life fluid spilling from his cavernous orifice. "What the bloody—?" His black eyes glint in the dim light.

I grin at him.

After one look at me, the girl shrieks, and scrambles backward up the beach, her round eyes locked with mine.

I wonder if it's my jagged teeth.

Her collar is now a faded red, brown almost. I narrow my eyes with curiosity as I watch her scurry away.

The male stands, a glorious, intriguing specimen. He's not unattractive as land dwellers go. His jaw is defined. His skin tight and smooth over prominent cheekbones.

"Oh, come on now!" he exclaims. "That was my dinner!"

I bug my eyes at him and take a step closer.

I'm too curious to be afraid of this magical creature, and I have no doubt my nexus powers are greater.

He steps back. "What's a vampire got to do to get a decent meal around here? I spent all day planning, contemplating the vintage, anticipating ambiance, selecting the picturesque location, and everything, and you go and ruin it."

Vampire.

This sounds familiar.

Vampire. I allow the name to roll around in my mind, but I can't place the land creature. So many demons in the "land above the sea." So many things that creep and bite and torment.

The vampire wipes the gore from his chin with the back of his hand and then licks it. "Darn good vintage too." He squints after the girl as he runs his tongue over a fang. "She wasn't done yet, not by a long shot. Now, her dimwit of a master's gonna handle it, and he'll make sure she gets hurt."

I blink innocently as I prowl closer.

"You're an interesting thing." He points at my chest and between my legs. "Scales, love? Who needs clothes anyway? Don't suppose you need them when swimming with the fishies."

I gnaw my lip with my sharp teeth.

The vampire leans away. "Pointy chompers. Hungry?"

I hiss.

He tilts his head. "Whatcha doing exactly?"

I ignore his incessant ramblings, hoping all terrestrials are not so verbose.

From the depths of my mind, I call my siren song, milking it from my consciousness into his. *Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.*

He jerks, but then freezes.

Oooh, O, lah. Oooh, O, lah. Ooh, lah. Aah, O, lah. Aaah, O, lah. Aaah, oooh, O, lah.

He snorts. Then laughs. "What's this? Are you singing to me, love?"

I intensify the pitch of my song. *Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.*

"I know what this is. You're trying to make me see things, put an illusion in my head, like you're a cuddly kitten or something. Something docile without such sharp teeth. Well, it's not going to work on me."

Oooh, O, lah. Oooh, O, lah. Ooh, lah. Aah, O, lah. Aaah, O, lah. Aaah, oooh, O, lah.

"Maybe you should try something else?" He slouches, which makes him look less intimidating. "Do you sing only sounds? *Ooh. Ahh.* Come on, little girlie. Take your time. Sound out your words. I'm listening."

I snarl and raise the volume. *Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.*

He claps his hands together and leans in. "What are you trying to say, princess? Out with it!"

He steps closer.

I saunter toward him, spinning my song. Despite his flippant remarks, he's showing signs of obedience in the steady weave of his body as he sways toward me.

"To the hellish depths!" He presses his palms over his ears. "Get out of my head, witch!" He releases a shaking hand to extend it toward me. "You'll do as I say… Your blood is mine to command… Come on, you!" He shakes his fist as if annoyed. "Oi, listen, you stupid magic!"

I feel a strange inkling under my hide. A brush of my blood against its vessels. Laughter rolls through my skull. A vampire. What's this, a weak spell?

Before he can fully summon whatever he's about to unleash, I clamp my fingers around his wrist and wrench his arm back so that he crumples to his shins.

"Hey now!" He tries to grab me, but I fling him into the sand and press my knee into his back. "Ow! Ow!"

I lean down, my dripping mane of indigo hair grazing his cheek, and this time sing my words into his ear while gripping his skull with my clawed fingers.

"Come, vile being of the night,
Where shadows and waters unite.
In moon's embrace, you'll find delight.
Beneath the stars, your fate takes flight."

His body relaxes, but still I sing.

"Oh, vampire with your pale, dead skin,
Your crimson thirst shall be your sin.
Surrender to the ocean's embrace,
In its depths, find your resting place."

His eyes drift closed. "Okay, love," he murmurs with his lips kissing the sand, "but don't say I didn't warn you. I like to bite."

I almost cackle as I draw back and pull him to his feet. My fingers trace coyly along his jaw, making his eyes jerk open. They're no longer black, but a rich brown reflecting the moonlight. His fangs have gone, and he smiles dreamily at me with gleaming, white, flat teeth.

Not willing to let my curiosity suffer, I smooth my satiny touch down over his pectorals. I almost draw back when I reach the prickly hairs.

Nothing like rigid scales.

"Is this standard, love?" he asks. "You are a pretty bird, but I don't go for this sort of thing on a first date."

I grip his jaw and bare my teeth.

He lifts his palms. "Easy there. I meant no offense. I mean, if you're taking me back to your lair, we should set some boundaries."

I snatch one of his hands and yank him toward the surf. He's still submissive and doesn't fight me even though he continues to say inane words.

I offer another verse to be certain of his submission.

"Hear the whispers of the waves,
As ancient secrets it craves.

Come, and let the waters enthrall,
The siren's song, the night's sweet call."

With wide eyes, he follows me in waist deep. I feel the pulse of horror beneath his skin. The ocean senses his alarm, and crests its waves, spilling over us, making my vampire cough and spurt the water.

His terror is extreme.

"What are you doing?" His free hand slaps the one I'm tugging him with. He works and tries to pry my grip off. "I can't breathe water. I may be undead, but I breathe air! Hey, cut it out!"

The will in this one is strong.

"Beneath the waves, your heart shall freeze,
In the deep, find your eternal ease.
Come, vampire, heed this plea,
Surrender to the abyss of the sea."

"I don't want to surrender! You're gonna drown me! Do you have any idea how much that hurts? Get off me, witch!"

A tremendous wave swells over us, and I pull him under. He flails desperately for the surface, but I sink my song into his mind. *Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.*

He goes limp, his eyes blinking at me through the current. My webbed fingers have already emerged, my lungs are already taking on water. I draw him back with me, farther still, until we crest the edge of the sea shelf and are out over deep waters.

The vampire still holds his breath. But bubbles slowly drift up from his mouth as he paces the release of his air.

His pupils are enlarged, filled with panic, but my thrall will not let him resist me. He is as good as mine. My thrall has coiled so deeply into his mind that even if I wasn't taking him to his death, it would hold him for a long time.

We sink lower into the black abyss as I drag him farther out to sea. My body, sensing my aquatic surroundings, has begun its change. This time gradually, painlessly. My fins sprout as my legs fuse. Movement becomes effortless, and I've hardly noticed my full change that has us moving along swiftly.

A large bubble escapes his mouth, and he thrashes. I watch him, guide him, as I swim backward. A sinister glee pounds through my chest as I gauge his suffering. Though I do not have to bestow mercy, I draw his arms to my waist and capture his gaze.

Be still. Your fight is needless. Open to the sea. Let it fill you.

He shakes his head, but it's too late. His body spasms uncontrollably.

Bracing both sides of his face, I draw his lips toward me. With my open mouth, I force more water into his almost filled lungs, sending with it my siren's kiss.

His chest swells with a deep soaking of water. He then exhales the stream. In and out.

Though the magic has worked immediately and he is not dying, not in pain, no longer fearing, his frozen-eyed expression tells me he will not forgive me for allowing him to suffer until his last breath.

Chapter 3
The Vampire

The liquid 'round us has this freaky glow, all ethereal and enchanting. It doesn't make being stuck here any more cozy. The deeper we go, the less of the pale moonlight sneaks through, and the eerie shadows just vanish into pure black. Swarms of flashy fish, scales shining in every color, zip around as if they're having a wild time, but it doesn't do much to shake off the gloom.

I'm soaking up every bit of the rotten taste of being snagged.

The wicked sprite held off till the very end, enjoying the show as I gasped and gagged. That smirk on her face grew wider as the saltwater seared my lungs and snatched away my breath.

That witch!

I'm gonna kill her.

Now that I see the creature in her half fish form, with her hair flowing like deep blue ink spilling from a twilight sky, I see her for what she truly is.

A siren.

A bloomin' siren!

The kingdom of Soundless Shores has been plagued enough by their yearly harvest, but Queen Serafina, the spiteful wench, hasn't cared enough to lift a finger to stop the coldhearted sea demons.

And I've stupidly allowed myself to be caught by one.

Curse it all!

In my vexation, some pesky memory barges in, a vision set to torture me.

I can count on it like breath.

It's of my foster folks, the only ones I've ever known, slogging away in their shop. Travers wallops iron with his hammer on the anvil, and Mavis's sprinkling fae-repelling stuff with a dash of her magic.

Typical goings-on.

They put on this facade of happiness, of being lost in their work, but the truth is they miss me, yearning for a comeback they know isn't happening. Wishin' on stars for something they can't have.

Her majesty won't stoop to setting free her beloved lapdog.

I hiss, spewing water past my lips, and the memory flees.

Drat. Still in the abyss.

My fishy jailer kicks up bubbles around us, slamming her tail like a hurricane. Her icy claw digs into my arm, ripping through skin as she hauls me down into the endless abyss.

She's not exactly handling things with kid gloves. Her moves are all fast and sudden, no time for gentle caresses.

My shoulder's on fire, tendons and muscles ripping apart, while the freezing water numbs every inch of me.

From my bleedin' inside out.

Her smooch gifted me the knack for gulping down water—icy water, not the cozy bath kind, but full-on ocean! I'm chugging saltwater in and out of my lungs as if it's air.

I can't brawl with her, can't make my fists clench or go for her throat. That cursed melody of hers drills into my skull, pulling my strings as if I'm some mindless puppet. And even though I hate it, curse it all, I start hungering for it.

Oh, keep crooning, you infernal marine songstress!

Blast it! You're so done for!

She laughs, a bubble of water escaping her lips, and I realize my thoughts are not my own. *I'm almost sorry for your fate, vampire. Almost. You are quite fascinating. If you were not meant for a greater purpose, I would consider making you my pet.*

Your pet? Oh, you have got to be kidding.

Rest assured, the Sea King has something else meant for you.

The Sea King, huh? This just keeps getting better and better. Perhaps while I'm enjoying my little underwater excursion, I can work out a deal to make sure those slimy, webbed fingers of theirs stay off our folks and they quit snatching our people.

A deal? The little witch releases a torrent of bubbles I take to be a laugh.

You've got this real talent for comfort, you nasty piece of work. Let me loose, and cut out that racket! I can't stand it. You're warbling so off-key I'd rather stuff my ears with jellyfish tentacles!

She scoffs. *You just might get your wish.* She yanks on my arm and flips that tail of hers. I reckon it could bust me up till I'm a lovely shade of purple.

Our little adventure drags us past some weird critters. Sharks and jellyfish, yeah, I've seen 'em, but there's some darker nasties skulking in the gloom that I've never clapped eyes on before.

We've dropped down a fair bit, always drifting farther from the shore. My vampiric night vision catches a glimpse of the scenery as we glide by coral outcrops, spotting those quick little fishies and the big sluggish sea monsters—

Until we descend above a cloud of sea gunk that blocks my view for some time.

We're floating above the ocean floor. The pressure in my skull won't shut up, nagging me nonstop. Blood starts dripping from my ears and nose, getting swept away by the current.

I reckon I won't kick the bucket down here, but the more time I spend under the sea, the more my cursed bod's gonna puff up, rot, and crumble to bits.

A never-ending purgatory.

The little siren snorts.

That's right. Enjoy your laugh, I snap.

I would have to say this is the most amused I've been in a long time.

I jerk on her grip, but her hold is firm. Like the icy grip of a frostweaver demon.

Underneath us, the blanket of sand and debris, kicked up by the fidgety seabed, starts to clear.

Majestic coral reefs crop up, all decked out with these luminescent organisms, putting on a show of colors that could give the most enchanting sunset a run for its money. Mysterious sea critters, with their eerie lights and captivating dances, crank up the magic in this underwater crypt.

Then we stumble upon something I never figured I'd set my gaze upon.

The siren kingdom. Lunaris.

No surface crawler has ever taken this path and lived to return to see the sun.

The underwater dome of the city's all covered in snaking sea plants, swaying as if they're on cue with the siren's tune.

Or I should say sirens' songs. The voices are blaring, sending shivers down my spine, and they just won't shut up.

I pull a face and thrash about, making it clear how much I'm revolted, but darn, I still can't shake off her thrall or break free from her hold.

The city's colossal, all lit up like a vampire ablaze under the sun, with sirens of every shape, size, and color buzzing around the outer dome. I can't figure if it's solid like glass or cloaked in some magical mojo.

Until sirens sink to its base and swim through the barrier as if it's a veil of gases and nothing more.

My little siren drags me to the outskirts of the city, greeting her fellow kind as brothers and sisters as she passes.

Ooh, Leira, what a charming catch you've brought! a female with flowing eel-like hair quips.

I bare my fangs and gnash them at her.

The female laughs. *He's full of spirit. How did you ever subdue him?*

Leira smirks. *He fell easily. Weak minded.*

Hey! I am not! I shoulder my captor, and the pair of sirens crow with laughter when the whole effort turns out to be a right pathetic show.

Leira doesn't stop before the wavy cloud around the city. She's through the weird stuff and yanking me with her.

I'm lost to a heaviness that feels strangely enough like swimming through old, clotted blood, before I'm coughed up onto the streets of Lunaris in a city filled with air. No soggy sea soup, I see.

Instantly my lungs seize up, and I vomit the scorching seawater from my body. The burn is intense, and I round over my sick on all fours and heave until I'm coughing up blood.

"You are going to pay for this, girlie." I hack some more.

My siren is standing over me on two legs. "I'll give you a minute, but that's all."

While my body's taking its sweet time to patch up—I wouldn't mind a throat or two to speed it along—I scan the scene. No one gives a toss about the vampire who just strolled into their precious kingdom.

With just a flick of their flashy tails, more sirens pass through from the ocean side. Just for a second of their metamorphosis, they're these creepy, shadowy wraiths straight outta some dark dimension, nothing but ethereal mist. Then bam! Two legs, just like that. Solid flesh and breathing air.

Huh. That's interesting mojo. What's powering such potent magic? The curiosity's leaving me with an itch that needs scratching.

I rake my sodden tresses off my forehead. The digs here are quite… moist. And warm. A vampire could be right comfy with the atmosphere. At least I won't become a waterlogged undead, picking up pieces of me as they swell and drop off.

Lots of voices jabbering though, but it's as if they're wrapped in cotton. What really grates on my senses is the never-ending drip drip of seawater from the arched ceiling, forming these little pools everywhere.

Sirens are all over the place, lounging in those pools lit up by glowy plants.

To my right, there's a crib that seems carved outta rock, sand, and coral. But even though it's all natural, the surfaces are scribbled with these fancy gothic carvings, a nod to the peril hiding within.

Never encountered creatures more stunning or deadly than these.

"Time to rise!" Leira's voice is silky yet condescending.

My body jerks as if on strings. “You don’t have to be rude about it.” I wipe the sputum from my chin. “A little kindness goes a long way, sweetheart.”

She doesn’t respond past a “follow me.” With an eye roll, I’m left to comply.

Leira’s got an impressive grace about her. Bold, strutting with confidence even though, by human standards, she’s starkers. The sway of those scaled hips has me all caught up. Her backside’s got the curves, just like a human’s, but when she was in the ocean, everything from her navel to the fins of her tail was one big line of carved muscle and shiny scales.

Beneath her tangle of soggy locks, sticking to her like a clingy ex, her back’s a tempting sight. Got this bare allure, scales scattered along her spine, dancing in a wave up over her right shoulder and across her clavicle.

When she turns, giving me a wicked look and mocking my sluggish moves, I ogle the swirl of scales covering what, in a human, should be breasts. But nah, they’re barely noticeable mounds of nippleless flesh, and I haven’t got a clue what their purpose might be.

She is an aquatic being. Don’t fishies lay eggs? No need for perky jugs, I suppose.

She’s all sleek, sinewy muscle. I gulp. I wouldn’t fancy being left alone in a dodgy alley with her.

And not a smidge of humanity about her, even if she wears the look. A central scale over her sternum is this scalloped ridged thing that looks fused directly to her skin, whether she’s in her siren or mock human form.

I stop in my tracks to gawk at the two-legged sirens having a grand ol’ time in the sea pools. In some places, in dark corners or before the opening of dwellings, black seaweed veils hang from the ceiling and rock outcroppings, giving the kingdom a proper eerie and mystical vibe.

It’s almost right down my alley, until I remind myself that these sirens lure their prey to the depths by their pretty faces and thrall.

I laugh, manically. Their thrall is no different from my compulsion and eternal youth.

“You laugh now, vampire,” a smug Leira says, “but just wait.”

Chapter 4
The Vampire

As I follow my little siren through this joint, the whispers, all haunting and echoey, play a game of tag with each other, giving me the creeps. No idea what they're jabbering about as the fishie girlie leads the way to the fancified center, probably the palace.

It's got me wondering if there's something fishy about this whole affair.

I snort, which earns me a glare from Leira.

The joint's practically a sea jungle, all this clingy flora and creepy-crawlies.

Are those pets? Tiny crabbies rockin' their sharp shells, and slimy snails hitching rides on the walls, leavin' a trail of gunk.

Despite the underwater chaos, I'm just tryin' to keep my game face on, not letting on that I'm not feelin' the thrill of this undersea adventure.

Soon the palace ceiling towers over me, like some grand cathedral rising out of the ocean depths. But the dead center isn't the usual walkable floor. It's got this funky pool, a gray abyss swirling before a wicked throne made of rusty chains and gleaming black pearls. The place is a real head-turner, like the sea decided to throw a royal rave right here.

My peepers tear away from the abyss, landing on the siren chilling on the throne. This bloke is a real beast on two legs, his scales copper and blazing as if dipped in molten lava. The bulging sac between his scale-peppered legs tells me he's the boss-man and bagging all the fishmaids. I'd wager my sharp fangs that's the Sea King right there.

I'm not the only clod being marched in here by some high-and-mighty temptress. A mishmash of other demons, six to be precise, are prodded forward, some shackled, others, just like me, strung along solely because we've been thralled.

I squint through the murky gloom, and bam, there's this bloke, an ancient duskshade demon pal of mine. Tiberius. We've got history, way back. The guy's a shadow ace, especially when the sun's doing its last dip. We've tag-teamed in more brawls than I can count. Tiberius throws shade as if it's his day job, leaves my opponents scratching their heads, and that's my cue to swoop in, sink my fangs, and savor that sweet, crimson cocktail.

"T-man, they snagged you too?" I hiss.

"I was smokin' epella weed on the dock when she started into her song." He hacks one of those demonly, disdainful coughs, and then nonchalantly spits on the floor.

A female siren, rocking cherry red scales as if she's a fresh pint of blood mixed with achala berry juice, shoots him a look and delivers a swift jab to his ribs. He grunts, but there's a smirk dancing on his lips. He's been through worse. Miserable typical day.

"Didn't know it was a harvest night," he says. "It's never the same night."

I wag my head. "Never bloody is."

"Quiet!" the siren barks.

Tiberius clamps his mouth shut. I lean behind Leira and her salty hair and whisper to him, "Did you try throwing shade?"

"Vampire, hush!" Leira exclaims.

Tiberius just gives a little shake of the noggin. Melodic vixen had him proper gobsmacked, didn't she? Poor bloke didn't get a move in before she had him wrapped around her finger.

Me and my demon pals are all lined up before the abyss, its powerful current enough to stir the fishy air. Since I've had a moment to mull over my fate, it hits me—the stench of this joint is just like the weathered docks and rugged beach.

Leira and her other siren sisters, I say this 'cause they are all girls, kneel before their sovereign. The rim of the room is filled with gawking fish folk. Now that I'm ogling the aquatic eye candy, I see that some of their scales are etched with runic patterns and burnished with gold. Glimmering tattoos, no doubt from squid ink, dot their foreheads and paint their arms. All except Leira, whose gleaming skin and scales remain unmarred. Does she gotta earn her war paint? She's nothing like the lineup of she-sirens all fancified before me, but the big fish himself, the Sea King, out stripes them all.

His scales are etched, his skin is scribbled. He's a fearsome warrior god with wicked piercings, jewels, and bobbles.

He stands from his throne, his beefy thighs and torso shadowing it. His copper locks are twisted and snarled and woven with shells and bones. A central scale on his sternum is nearly the size of my fist, and glows as if his entire life force powers it.

"Denizens of the abyss, creatures of the deep, hear me." The Sea King's voice resonates through the throne room, shaking the entire structure. "The time has come to embrace the arcane currents that pulse through our realm. As the tides of magic ebb, we stand at the brink of another yearly harvest, a harvest that will empower our nexus scales and fortify our kingdom."

"I don't plan on embracing a thing," I mumble. I didn't exactly write it on my to-do list tonight.

The blabbering king goes on. "Behold, the annual offering of demon powers, a ritual as ancient as the ocean itself. As the powers are received by the depths, we shall draw upon the energies that stir." He touches the large scale on his chest. "Our

nexus scales shall drink from the dark well of power, weaving into our existence otherworldly might."

"I didn't sign up for this bleedin' mess," I mutter. I focus my mind on the thrall trapping me. I can't let this siren command me a second longer.

"Let the ethereal dance of magic commence as we gather the essence of our sacrifices to sustain our realm. As we embrace the chilling winds of enchantment, may the power that courses through us be as enigmatic as the depths from which it arises."

I lean over and growl at Tiberius. "Pinching our powers right under our noses, they are. Coldhearted, thieving sirens."

Sweat's cascading down the sorry demon's mug, like a waterfall in hell.

"Hey, hey. I'm gonna get us out of here, T-man."

"I can't break her thrall." He grinds out his words through gritted teeth.

Leira's distracted by the ceremony, her hold on me loosened, but I'm still woozy from the last little bits.

"From this harvest," the Sea King says, "let our kingdom rise, shrouded in the sinister glow of power, a testament to the union of our realm with the mysteries that lie beyond."

I've had just about enough. "Hey, Your Fishiness!" With a final grunt, I push the rest of Leira's hold back and saunter forward between her and her cherry-red sister.

"What are you doing?" Caught off guard or something, my jailor gives me a nasty hiss. But, weirdly, instead of shutting me down, she's frozen in her own freak-out, too busy being embarrassed to block me.

I ignore her and address the king. "Mate, I reckon you'll be a bit staggered to find out I'm Prince Draven from the kingdom of Soundless Shores. This move of yours probably breaks some half a dozen treaties." Possibly. "I mean, whatcha gonna do? Feed us to the pool? Queen Serafina won't look too kindly on her subjects being used to fuel your nexus thingamajigs."

The Sea King gives me a look that says I've just interrupted his afternoon siren song to a pod of whales. The bloke doesn't seem to fathom that I, of all people, would dare to have a chat with him. I'm a regular-sized fella, bit on the skinny side. Got some muscle from hammering iron, but I gotta face it, I'm nothing compared to the mighty Sea King.

He blinks down at me, looking bored, as if the very idea of me talking to him is more tired than a vampire at a blood bar.

His royal brows rise. "Prince Draven?" He presses a fist to his mouth, trying to stifle a laugh. The whole room's on edge. He swings around to face Leira. "You brought a vampire *prince* into my kingdom?"

Leira's mug turns crimson up to her ears. "King Nereus, I didn't realize he was a prince. He was wandering the beach, looking like a vagrant."

"Hey! A vagrant!" I puff my bare chest. "I'll have you know my leather trench coat, which is probably all ruined from lying on the beach all night, cost a pretty penny! Some vagrant? You don't need to be so judgy."

The spectators snicker.

The king raises his palms to calm the crowd. "Prince Draven, you believe I am in violation of some treaty?"

I shrug, but at the same time say, "Yeah! Look, mate, how 'bout you cut the drama and release me and my crew? We can work out a deal that doesn't involve your kind slinking around my turf. Sound fair?"

The Sea King wags his head as if I'm a naughty bird. "You mean Queen Serafina's kingdom."

"Oi, mate!" Ire burns through me. "She's my accursed queen, and I'll yap for her when she's not around. If that rattles your cage, then drag your soggy hide out of the sea and have it out with her, yeah?"

King Nereus is practically yawning. "You amuse me, bloodsucker, but I'm afraid I make no deals with landlubbers, especially one as useless to the harvest as a vampire."

Leira coughs and bows her head.

In a blink, I catch a wave of shame and utter confusion rollin' off her. Almost makes me want to throw her a bone of sympathy. Almost.

I cock my head. "Useless?"

"Your enhanced senses are redundant. Leira, darling," he says softly, "I don't think you realized that we have no use for augmenting what is innate."

"Daddy, he has magic. I saw it with my own eyes."

Daddy. She's one of daddy's dearests. And a princess.

I snort.

From the kindness in his voice when he addresses her, I suspect he has a soft spot for her.

"Compulsion," the Sea King says. "Useless. Weaker than our thrall."

I bug my eyes. This sea king must not know of the extent of our powers, how some vampires are gifted with blood magic.

Some. Not me. My ability is patchy at best.

I press my lips into a hard line. If I'm useless, I just might get out of this undead, but I have Tiberius and the rest of the lot to think of. Demons aren't undead. If the Sea King siphons their powers, I don't know what will happen to them.

"Hey, so why don't you release me, and we can have a nice chat about options," I say.

Nereus snorts. “Nice try, Draven.” He turns to the room and lifts his arms. “We begin the harvest!”

A raucous cheer erupts from his subjects, echoing through the shadows. They’re totally stoked, and I can practically hear the sirens raising a toast to their dark and mischievous leader.

“Melisande!” The Sea King gestures toward the first siren at the end, with black and silver scales, her hair jet black like a moonless sky during a vamp rave. “Bring forth your offering, daughter. Present him, and he shall be judged.”

“Judged? Now hold on!” I exclaim.

They all ignore me.

Melisande stands and coaxes her demon forward. He’s wrapped in cord and can’t move a thing past his bronzed legs. “Your Majesty.” She bows her head. “This is a tempest demon. He commands the winds and storms, and is able to summon powerful tempests from nothing.” She gallantly sweeps backward as her catch is brought forward.

“It is an acceptable offering, Melisande.” King Nereus speaks to the room. “This tempest demon will allow us to control the air and water elements! His sacrifice will do much to enhance our powers, allowing us to draw ships into our abyss with storms under our command!”

The siren throng hoots and whistles.

“Present him before the Abyssal Vortex,” the Sea King says.

The pool begins churning something fierce. Runic symbols along the edge pulsate, animating as if the squiggly shapes are about to lift into the air.

The tempest demon’s getting a front-row seat to his own demise as he’s dragged forward. Dude’s putting up a right struggle, but two stone-cold siren bouncers are keeping him in check. It’s a real tango of chaos and restraint, and the demon’s the unwilling star of this twisted dance.

Right at the rim of the pool, the big lug suddenly jerks, his back arching painfully as if it could break in two. With a proper howl, his mouth opens in anguish.

Then I spot it. His power. Thin wisps of dark mist and undulating ink leach from every single pore of his body.

The cadence of his howl is a flaming stake through my skull. The other ugly beasties are getting all worked up, ready for a proper brawl, but just as we’re gearing up to kick some siren arse, a horde of them swoop in and tie us up in their seductive tune. The blasted song of those wailing sirens drowns out the raging tempest demon’s howls, leaving me deafened and itching for a bit of mayhem.

I lose any fight and go limp. In my compliance though, my gaze is still fixed on the drain of the demon’s power, and as his body slackens, so does his life force.

They are one.

“Oh, hell!” I exclaim.

When all tendrils of power are gone, the demon collapses before the vortex, nothing but a husk.

His carcass is dragged away.

An applause goes up, filling the chamber.

T-man’s face is pinched, and he’s whimpering.

I try once again. “King Nereus! I’m not asking nicely. Release my people or there’s gonna be a real apocalypse here. Like hell on earth.”

As he strides toward me, his muscles flexing, his hair wild, his eyes fierce, his enlivened nexus scale newly set aglow burns its unholy image into my retinas.

Filled with the power of my demon pal, I see.

The Sea King halts before me. “Prince Draven, you have been judged.”

“Judged?” I glance to the side. “What’s that supposed to mean, you slimy git?”

“You are worth nothing to this harvest.”

I then realize too late where his mitts are headed. Before I can blink, he snaps my neck, and it’s lights out for Draven.

Chapter 5
Draven

A fierce hammering through my skull jerks me from nightmare land.

My world's all sloshy, and gray, and I'm weightless.

"Bloody hell!" My words escape in a bubble through the water. He broke my neck, the surly Sea King.

I gather he didn't know I would reanimate.

But damn it all, I'm still fathoms under the ocean.

And floating around like discarded flotsam.

I clamp my gob shut. I assume I don't have the effect of the siren's kiss anymore since I've kicked the bucket, and I'm not about to suck in a bloomin' lungful to find out.

Fish and other undersea scavengers flit about, some glowing enough to light my surroundings.

Unfortunately. The place is a real horror scene.

I'm not thrilled about the bodies and bits they're tearing at.

My other demon pals, I take it. Tossed like day-old corpses into a crude, watery grave.

I spot Tiberius floating cockeyed, his eyes white and sightless. His scaly flesh missing chunks of meat. Oh, T-man. A hagfish darts forward and takes a nibble on his nose.

I wave my arm wildly. "Oi! Bugger off!"

My lungs immediately rebound from my outburst and take on water. My vision dims as I curse and thrash against the burn. Bloody hell, the pain.

So no siren's blessing.

Just great. I'm gonna die again.

Well, to the depths with me. I'm already in hell.

My body bucks uncontrollably, the whole time curses running through my head of how I'm gonna rip into Leira's neck if I ever see her again.

I rise to my undeath, prepared to put up a fight. No time for prattling on; I've already become fish food while lounging about. Stupid chunks of my skin nipped off. I'm gonna need a whole lot of pints to fix this mess.

If I ever get my paws on that sea king… there will be hell to pay.

I have bigger problems for the moment. I don't fancy a never-ending cycle of death and the torture that comes with it, and as it is, I'm just a ticking clock down here until my lungs give out and I'm gulping down this briny mess.

After casting a regretful gaze at my mate, I shove off, navigating through the aquatic ballet of fish. It's easy to tell which way's up by the dance of the slippery critters. I lost count of how deep into the abyss I've plunged or how far from the sodding shore I am though.

Chances are, I'll die a good dozen times more before I breach the surface.

After a spell of paddling upward, the fiery ache in my chest screams at me. No use dragging it out, so I slurp in water, welcoming the dark descent into unconsciousness.

I just hope a school of sharks doesn't fancy me for a midnight snack.

Chapter 6
Leira

It's a pity. Prince Draven has drowned for the eleventh time. I was shocked when he regained consciousness the first time, and then the second, and now I study him with curiosity.

He's quite amusing as he wakes, and thrashes about, and tries to make it to the surface.

While he's unconscious, I practice the new powers imbued within my nexus scale. I particularly like the tempest storm and the whirlpool effect it has under the sea, and have already swirled the prince and flung him several leagues from Lunaris.

His locks are all tossed about and his pants are ragged and hanging in tatters from his body. The fish that have been chewing on him haven't helped his pathetic state.

Daddy humiliated me. My first time to the surface and I brought back a vampire.

I will never make that mistake again.

No. Never.

A prince. Unbelievable.

Why couldn't he have been a demon skulking about on the beach?

I forge a coral spear from a nearby reef, this ability a gift from a slimy coralyx elemental forger, a demon my sister Lorelei brought for the harvest.

All the demons my sisters found were acceptable. Of course they were. They knew what they were looking for because they've been to the "land above the sea" dozens of times, and have earned their runes.

How could I have been so stupid?

Prince Draven's drifting in a counter current, getting farther and farther away from me.

Water bubbles lift from his mouth, his body expelling the liquid inside his lungs so they can breathe the air they are supposed to have.

He won't find any down here.

I grip the bumpy coral spear. I know I'm acting like a child, running off the way I have, but it was all I could do to maintain my control until the harvest was over and the demon corpses were discarded.

I didn't stay for the revelry, the haunting celebration as my kin gathered in the courtyard lit by a magically projected moon and surrounded by twisting vines and shining tropical flowers. The air had been filled with a victorious melody, sung by my siren folk, a mesmerizing tune that is still stuck in my skull though I am fathoms away.

The entire kingdom was all too happy with its newfound magics, and no one noticed the littlest princess skulk away.

I know enough of the goings-on. I'm not missing a thing.

My people are regal and poised, and will be moving with a chilling grace, almost ghostlike as they dance together, showcasing both their alluring beauty and the potent energies they've harnessed. They will drink and party into the night while basking in and experimenting with their newfound abilities.

They're vain. But with our thrall and how overindulged they've all become, can I blame them?

We're nearly untouchable under the sea.

As I passed through the dome of the city, once more emerging as my siren, I left behind an atmosphere charged with a sinister yet enchanting energy.

Nothing I am feeling now.

I'm sullen, gloomy.

Prince Draven's body twitches. He's coming back to life, it would seem.

I wait for his body to rotate in the current. He's more or less mirroring me, his appendages floating uselessly, making him look like a disconnected puppet.

I draw the coral spear back over my shoulder and take aim. I mean to use my bladefiend powers to aim it straight and true into Draven's navel. Aria assured me her demon never missed where he was aiming. That was his ability until we sucked him dry.

Just as I release the spear, my nexus scale pulsating over my sternum and lighting up like glinting jellyfish as I wield my power, Prince Draven's eyes flash open.

My mouth shapes a horrified O as the spear glides smoothly into his navel. He grunts, his hands automatically coming to the sharp coral. But he's immobilized. Despite the pain carving his features, he keeps his lips clamped shut and his lungs swelled to hold off the influx of water.

Blood already seeps around the spear, a scribble of red disappearing in the blue of the water.

His eyes lock with mine. For the briefest moment there's confusion, but then utter hatred passes over his features.

I'm gaping at him, horrible guilt rising in me. I give a single flick of my tail to bring myself closer to him, though unsure

why I do it.

His eyes narrowed and holding me, he jerks on the spear's shaft. Inch by steady inch he twists and works the spear from his own body.

I drift closer. Prince Draven is mentally growling now, his lips curled up cruelly.

Dead. She is dead. I'm gonna take this spear and…

Okay! I swish forward, and before he can give another proper tug, I grab the spear with my claws. *No!*

A fire lights his countenance. *Burn in hell!*

We meet each other with silencing glares. My lungs soak the water in and out as I hold him.

Prince Draven is working hard to not inhale.

You're about to drown again, I say.

Like you care. My bits are all just target practice for you, I see.

I'll give you my siren's kiss.

I don't bloody want it! he yells.

You are powerless. You're going to die again, and you have a spear in your stomach.

No thanks to you!

I'm sorry, I say. I don't mean it.

Like hell you are!

I smirk. *Let me help you.*

Sod off! He tries kicking away with his feet, but I have a firm grip on the spear. He only manages to tear the hole in his stomach farther. He grunts. *Witch!*

More blood escapes his soggy body. He's really looking gross and swollen. He's missing a chunk of skin on his earlobe. His nose is crooked; I think a bull shark took a plow into him for the fun of it.

Prince Draven's expression is twisted into agony.

As if he's a sea kebob, I yank the spear, with him, and bring him right up to me. He's too busy gripping the spear to stabilize it in his gut to stop me.

I dive over him and plant my lips on his.

Oh, bloody heck. He becomes drooping and compliant against me as I fill his lungs with water and imbue his body with my magic.

For just a moment, I imagine—no, I sense—something electric between us, like the tingle when I touch jellyfish or the shock when I run into an electric eel.

It's my imagination, I know it is, but I find myself sinking further into my siren's kiss. A kiss that means nothing and is all magical in origin.

Our soaks become one. Indistinguishable as the water inspires and expires from us between snatches of desperate lip adjustments.

His hands leave the spear, and he's suddenly bracing my cheeks, thirsty for more of my kiss.

I haven't ever kissed another creature like this. Zest tingles up my spine and out through my fins. I'm tense, afraid I'll nip him with my sharp teeth.

I don't understand. I'm repulsed. My rational mind tells me I should be. I am. His undead body is vile. Soggy. Mushy. Falling to pieces in my arms. Chunks floating off with the current.

But something on the surface begs me to sink deeper into our kiss.

Prince Draven. Prince Draven. His name wraps my skull, sings through my mind. *Kiss. I will give you my kiss. Prince Draven. Kiss me…*

His lips are not waterlogged balloons. His fingers not swollen logs clinging to me as if I mean everything to him.

He moves suddenly, changing his ministrative tactics. A sharp pain lances my lower lip and inside my mouth, straddling my puffy lip, and my flesh is being sucked between his teeth, and the pain is biting.

I shift with alarm, my surprise exclaiming as a water bubble between us, and with it comes traces of blood.

I taste it now. My blood. Flecks of it fuse with the watery soup around us.

Prince Draven does not let go of my lip. Nor my face. He hungrily rounds over me and drinks until my lip is twice its size and he's groaning with pleasure, or satiation, or…

I shove at him. *Get off me!* The spear impaling him bounces off my side, but my scales protect me from the jagged coral.

His hold is firm. *Is the bloomin' venom not doin' its job on her? She should be over the moon thinking she's in love with me.*

I snort.

He said his words as if he was thinking to himself, as if I wasn't meant to hear.

But then I get his words loud and clear.

Leira, yank the spear out. Save the singing for the birds. No melodies, no mind games. No more. Not ever again. Just

be a good girl and do as I say. That spear's gotta go, and you're gonna dance to my tune from now on.

I whimper as he releases my lip. My blood floats between us, momentarily blotting my view of the prince. I gingerly press my fingertips to my mangled lip to stop the blood flow.

He drank from me!

How could he?

Too soon my blood swirling between us merges with the water, and I see his face.

Pointed fangs tinged red. Black eyes.

I'm appalled by the evil aura surrounding him.

The spear, love, he says. I wrap my hands around it as he braces himself with his hands on my shoulders. *Give it a good yank and let me loose.*

I don't want to listen to him, but I do have this overwhelming guilt.

He looks deeply into my eyes. *Be a good girl now. On the count of three.*

I nod slowly.

One… he begins. *Two…*

I yank the spear from his gut.

Prince Draven releases a bubble of vocal curses. *What part of "on the count of three" did you not understand?*

I scoff, and I point the bloodstained spear at his chest. *What was that? What did you do to me?*

Compulsion, love. And I just fed you some lines that you won't ever be able to break from.

Liar!

See if you can siren me now, bit. He wiggles his brows at me while his hands prod his stomach. The side of his mouth curls up. *That siren blood's some good stuff. Near instantaneous healing.* He removes his fingers, and I see that his navel is mostly unmarred, except for a pink tinge.

His earlobe regrows before my eyes. And as I'm staring incredulously, he reaches up and, with a wince, rebreaks his nose, straightens it out, and rubs the bridge as I assume it's healing as well.

I make a face. *Ugh, you are disgusting!*

He blows a stream of bubbles at me and sneers. *Siren me, princess. Come on now. Let's see if it worked.*

Go to the abyss!

I already am!

Before he realizes what I'm about to do, I haul back and punch him in the nose, crunching it so well there's a satisfying crackle of bone.

Leira! Geez! He adjusts his nose once again while leering at me.

You bit me! I prod my swollen lip to emphasize my annoyance.

You sirened me and let your bloody sea king—your father*—break my neck. And then how many times have you speared me while I've drowned—how many times now?*

I hum a simple, nonchalant tune as I float away. I won't tell him exactly what or everything I've done to his corpse for the last part of the night.

I think it's time to wash my hands of this land dweller. He has my siren's kiss now so he can get himself back to shore.

Screw him.

Chapter 7
Draven

Now hold on, princess! I launch myself at her, but that darn wispy tail fin of hers slips right through my fingers. And when she keeps swimmin' away like a slippery eel, I amp up the mojo, throwin' the full force of my compulsion at her. I gotta catch that slippery fish before she gets away. *Stop right there, little bit!*

She cuts the tail flicking, but she swivels to glare at me. Her inky hair's doing this sulking thing around her head, waving its disapproval of me.

I find myself staring at her, and I can't deny she's drop-dead gorgeous. Those deep, dark purple peepers of hers are a magnetic force pulling me in. I'm momentarily entrapped in the spell of her mesmerizing gaze.

Then she bares her rows of jagged teeth.

I flinch back. *Oi. Aren't you a sight to terrify!*

She snarls.

I work my arms in front of me, drawing myself toward her. *Right, love. This is how it's going to be. You're gonna use the speed of your fishie fins there to take me back to the surface and to shore. Got that?*

She curls her lip up.

I snort. *You can't wrap me in your thrall now, can you? Vampire trumps siren. I knew it.* I stick my tongue out at her.

She lifts her chin and rolls her eyes. *You're wrong, prince. You are a half dead, rotting corpse. You are repulsive and weak, and I'm gonna destroy you.*

I slice through the water right up to her face with its features carved sharper than a vampire's fang. She has a spray of scales raining from her right temple down to her jaw in an attractive setup up like an ornate tattoo.

I snidely lift my lip. *Try it, little girl.*

Not a syllable of her dreadful siren song sifts through my noggin. I let my head roll back with laughter. I am so delighted with this development I can't stop myself.

King Nereus's youngest daughter under my command. Right. Queen Serafina will love this.

Which reminds me. While little bit is glaring at me, with her hand on her scaly hips, I narrow my gaze on her chest scale. It's not glowing now, but it was.

How's that work? I point at her sternum.

Leira huffs and crosses her arms over her chest as if she's about to drop the snarkiest comment this side of the kingdom. *I don't know. It's magic, idiot vamp face.*

She really isn't trying to swim away. I've got her. Just to rub things in, I work my index finger in a circle in front of me and say, *Spin for me, love.*

Her mouth falls open. *I'm not gonna spin for you!*

I compound the weight of my demand. *Come on, show me that dazzling swish of your fish hips!*

I hate you! She lets out this ear-piercing shriek, flipping her tail like a pro, twirling like a tornado. Arms raised high, she's a whirlwind of chaos as her feathery fin ends splay out in some mystical dance. Her hair's doing its own wild routine, adding a touch of insanity to the whole spell she's casting, but in a way that's oddly captivating.

That gut of mine clenches. I can't ignore the uneasy truth. These sirens are not just captivating—they're as deadly as a stake through a vamp's heart.

When she halts her twirling number, I stick my hand out. *Now be a good girl and take Daddy's hand.*

She makes a retching sound but slips her slimy webbed mitts into mine. Then she's jerking my arm and dragging me along. *Don't ever call yourself daddy. Not anywhere I can hear you.*

Don't fancy yourself into that, huh?

You sicken me.

Good!

She gives that tail of hers a defiant twitch, propelling us forward with a not-so-gentle nudge. *Your stupid white hair is all green from algae goo.*

Platinum, not white, platinum… what? Green!

We squabble the entire cursed journey to the shore. I'm knackered from her constant yapping and this abysmal sea. I swear on my undead existence Leira navigates every twist in the thickest kelp forests she can unearth.

And I have no interest in unraveling the mystery of what squirted black goo all down my chest when we passed through the last shipwreck. My skin is sticky, and my chest hairs matted together in some unholy alliance that's plotting its own rebellion. Freakin' fantastic, that is.

The waves cough us up onto the black sandy beach, and I tumble from Leira's side, only to sprawl face down in a pile of sea grass and clams.

Leira's all high and mighty, flappin' her tail as if she's too good for the whole beach scene, nonchalantly lounging on her scaly elbows, acting as if the sea owes her something.

Grr.

Immediately my lungs expel the sea sludge. Despite hacking to undeath, I press up onto my hands and knees to keep my eye on her. I gotta stay sharp with this one.

Never break my gaze with a siren.

Never let her thrall me.

Leira sits there like an imbecile and lets her lung water roll down her chin. When that's all gone, she dips her mouth back into the water and sucks down another sandy gulp as if it's the latest blood type on the menu.

Gaw.

"Not ever doing that again," I snap. "You fish folk can just keep your flappy mitts to yourselves. No treaties. Screw you. You and your people step foot on shore again, and I will dust you on sight. Got that?"

Leira waits as if she's bored and whatnot.

"What are you waiting for? Leave before I kill you!" I snarl.

"Release me completely from your influence and I'll go. We can forget this ever happened."

"Like hell we can! You offed T-man. He and five other demons! It's war, mate." My shoulders jerk back with an idea. "In fact, consider yourself my first prisoner."

Her peepers widen, all plump and juicy like a pair of ripe plums.

I lurch up from the ground, moving faster than a vamp in a blood frenzy. Gotta be quicker than a hiccup to catch this siren before she takes a dive. With a growl that echoes across the dawn, I launch myself over her like a bounding hellhound. She's no damsel in distress; this fishy gal's got reflexes sharper than my wit.

We hit the water, writhing like a couple of molting sylph daemons—all thrashing waves and tangled limbs. I'm choking on seawater, hacking up a lung as she's tearing into my flesh and spewing curses that'd make a sailor blush. We're a messy tango of claws, curses, and soggy supernaturals.

She can't thrall me though.

Bloody hell! Her ruddy tail goes swishing 'round, giving me a good whack on the backside. "Ow! You witch! Knock it off! Ditch that thing! No need for it in the cozy cell you're headed to."

"No. No. No!" She flips herself and makes a mad crawl toward the crashing waves.

But she's too late. As I'm rising to my knees and choking, a horrible rip and sequence of cracks meet my hearing. Before my eyes, her tail fin cleaves in two and parts of her are just violently shattered and rearranged.

Nothing like her seamless shift when in the ocean, when passing through the magic mojo around the sea kingdom.

Leira cries out, momentarily frozen, but as soon as her legs are bendable, she continues her escape, scrambling up onto two nimble legs.

For a second too long, I'm gawking at the horror of her change. Parts of her just disintegrated like a vampire turning to dust. Then I realize that I commanded her change, against her will. She couldn't flee from me now with her fishie appendage even if she wanted to.

But she's trying her hardest on her two legs.

The morning sun's doing its usual early bird routine, suddenly bursting over the horizon as if it's got something to prove. It's a blinding glare, so bright it makes a vamp squint. Leira's caught off guard, struggling against the sun's rays, so I decide to give her a one-way ticket to the surf and body slam her, just to add a little dramatic flair.

Fun in the sun, Draven style.

She's stunned for the moment, the breath knocked from her. Then a wave rolls over us, and she's hollering something fierce. "Get off me, vampire! Let me go!" She coughs and chokes as water slips into her pathetic human lungs.

I grab the fishie by her bleedin' hair, yankin' her up the beach away from the waves. She hits the hard wet sand like a sack of tuber devils, gaspin' for air.

The remaining scales on her are this chaotic fireworks show, shooting up her glistening form as if she's covered in gemstones catching the first bit of sunlight. And even though she's all limbs, slippery and tangled hair, sprawled out like a slimy puzzle, I can't help but admit—for a split second—she's the kind of gorgeous that makes me forget I'm in the business of taking nasties down.

Her nexus scale does this flashy thing, telling me she's up to no good.

"Oi, whatcha doing there, girlie?" I smash her down into the sand, straddling her hips as if it's the last dance at a demon rave.

She's gnashing those razor-sharp chompers at me, and I gotta say, they're not the average set of pearly whites. No, those bad boys stay the same, even when she's doing the human shuffle.

Same goes for those ridiculously long lashes and the killer talons.

She drags those claws of hers across my chest, and I let out a yowl that could wake the dead. Just as I'm about to

command her to chill, my instincts take over. No time for words; it's all about action.

Her blinking sternal scale declares impending mischief, so instead of commanding her to halt her theatrics, my black nails lengthen and I give her a taste of what she's dishing out.

I clamp them around the edges of the violently throbbing scale, digging my nails into her skin. It's not easy; her skin is thick, but I sink my fingers to the bone of her sternum.

Leira's screaming and tearing at me, prying at my arm, but it all really happens too fast. With a singular twist, I sever the bits anchoring the scale to her. It tears away with a bloody chunk still attached at the scale's base, leaving an oozing hole in her chest.

She shrieks and viciously fights me. "What have you done!"

"Be still, bit."

She falls limp underneath me, but her flaccid limbs don't stop her face from twisting up in fear.

The nasty, gloppy scale pulsates in my palm. Got my attention, this thing. I can hardly peel my gaze away.

This holds T-man's duskshade power. The tempest demon's storm. An elemental forger's abilities. A bladefiend's precision.

What else have we got lurking in here?

"Please give it back," Leira whispers.

I narrow my eyes on her tiny nose. "Not bleedin' likely."

I slide off her hips, and with one hand clutching her scale and the other curling around her petite throat, I drag her to her feet. "Walk! I know you can do that. I've seen those legs work."

I shove her forward. The sun's popped up all the way above the horizon. Still just a glaring nuisance as low as it is. It seems I was floating around as fish food for just the remaining night after the harvest.

After the Sea King broke my neck.

So no one even knows I'm missing.

Grand.

I spot my leather trench and steer my prisoner toward it. At least her highness spewed me up onto the right beach. "Pick it up."

She bends and, as she does, gives me an eyeful of her scaled rear end. I'm not sure if she's hiding her bits the way the Sea King's scaled pouch had him all camouflaged, but I don't see anything I'm not supposed to. Her scales conceal like fur.

She shivers as she stands, one hand pressed to her bleeding chest and the other holding my damp trench out to me. "Your Highness."

Her words are mocking.

I squeeze the nexus scale as I consider ways to flay her. "Put it on. You look cold."

She snorts. "Me? Your flimsy costume is in tatters. You should wear it." She points at my crotch. "What is *that* poking out?"

"What?" I look down. "There's nothing poking—"

I get a knee to the groin, and instantly drop to my knees. "Damn it, Leira! You don't kick a guy there!"

Before I can command her, she's on me, my trench discarded once again, and wrestling the scale from my grip.

I should've known she wouldn't be dancing to my tune so easily. She'll never be completely compliant, not unless I spell it out for her. Even without her scale, those innate skills of hers give her the power to resist the fog of my compulsion. She's a tricky one, that's for sure.

"Listen, princess." I grunt as I fight her claws. My wrist and hand are in shreds. Blood's streaming down my skin and splattering our torsos. "Stop fighting me!"

She sinks to her knees in front of me so that we are face to face, both of us huffing our breaths, our eyes shooting daggers at each other, annoyance cranked up to eleven. Her lip's still busted and swollen. Blood's oozing from her chest like a leaky blood pouch, but she's not batting an eyelash. Is she concerned?

Not in the slightest.

She only wants what I'm not gonna give her.

"I can see I have to be really specific, that you'll need a lot of redirection like some tot." The lacerations on my chest and arm sting as they slowly heal. I need more blood.

Her blood would do.

She defiantly spits her words. "I am strong."

"I gather that!" I shake my wrist out. I still have the scale. This prize isn't slipping through my fingers.

She's puffin' up that itty-bitty chest of hers, all dramatic and whatnot.

"Does it hurt to breathe air?"

She snarls.

"All right then." I gaze into her pretty face as I give her the rundown. "Here's the deal. You and I are taking a little trip to

the palace. Got a little something to show her majesty." I wave the scale in the air, the corners of my mouth lifting into a mischievous grin.

She shakes her head with those wide peepers of hers. "No. Please. Prince Draven, I need my scale. I am begging you. Return it to me and let me go."

I snort. "Begging won't work, pet. I gave that sea king a polite chat, didn't I? And what did I get? Now, you do get some kudos for the sweet approach. But let's get one thing straight. You follow my orders. No fuss. No scratching, no fighting. You'll be the epitome of obedience. Got it?"

"Do you prefer that I call you Your Unholiness?"

I flash a wicked grin. "Draven's fine. Drop the princely bit, yeah?"

"Absolutely, *Draven*. I will do as you command."

In her tone, I catch a vibe. She's just itching to stir up trouble the moment she gets the chance.

With that unmistakable whiff of mischief in the air, I'll need to keep my guard up.

Chapter 8
Leira

He ripped my nexus scale from my chest! The stupid barnacle head dug his filthy claws into my chest and tore out my nexus scale!

My legs are rubbery as the prince marches me up the meandering path to the obnoxious edifice on the hillside. The palace of Soundless Shores is nothing like the one in Lunaris. This fortress above the sea is black and honed out of the jagged seaside cliff as if they rose from the depths together. The peninsula it sits on must be at the edge of the kingdom.

I hope it falls off into the ocean.

As we climb the winding course, the black sea spreads out below us, filled with rage, its waves thrashing the hills of earth as if determined to punish the vampire prince for taking me.

If I had my nexus scale, I would send a storm to knock this fortress into the murky abyss!

Prince Draven is silent, but his compulsion is a wave at my back urging me forward.

The only thing that lends warmth to this forsaken place is the sun on my shoulders. My salty hair is already tacky and stuck to me, but I'm glad for its length grazing the upper edges of my bottom.

Because I feel exposed in just my hide. My scales are so minimal when I'm on two legs, and from the looks the prince sends me, this is not how the women around here present themselves.

Because I'm a siren, you jerk, and should be in the sea!

I give him another menacing glare. He put his trench on when I refused, and it cloaks him like a seaweed robe.

My wound dribbles blood past my navel and leaves a trail on the damp rocks cutting into my feet. The black rock is sharper than coral, and tears with every footfall, but the prince doesn't complain. He's barefoot too. So I keep my head high.

As we come closer to a single solitary door tucked into some remote recess in the wall, creatures crammed into rock crevices stir, just like sea grotesques coming to life when they are disturbed. My instincts tell me this is a nocturnal realm, where vile creatures like my prince here wait until the sun sets to create their mischief.

With a defiant flick of my head, I halt outside the door, waiting for the prince to command me. The wood is weathered. Dried salt clings to it. But that's not what's unusual; a thick tentacle curls around the handle, knotted to the iron like rope.

"Open up, Lurksir," the prince says.

A single eyeball on a long stem slinks from a crack along the door. It twitches as it shifts its focus from me to Draven. "Whooo's wanting entraaance throo my door?"

Draven rolls his eyes. "Cut it out, Lurksir. It's the bleeding prince. Take your slimy tentacle off the handle and open up!"

"The p-p-pretty lay-dee?

My gallant prince sinks his fingers into my hair, gripping me along the scalp, and yanks me down a fraction as if the eyeball is half blind. "My dinner! Quit asking so many questions. It's none of your business."

I elbow his unholiness. His retreating fingers take several strands of hair right from my scalp when he can't extricate them smoothly from my snarled locks. I hiss, making sure he knows my rows of pointed teeth are for more than tearing into seafood.

I wonder how vampire tastes.

The voice in the crevice snorts. "Fishhhed her frooom the seeeea!" It cackles as its cerulean tentacle uncoils and leaves behind a trail of yellow slime.

"Thanks a bunch, Lurksir." The prince grabs the handle only to exclaim his displeasure when slime squishes between his fingers. He yanks the door open though, and we enter into a rear courtyard.

After first shaking the goo from his hand and wiping the remains on his tattered pants, Prince Draven wastes no time pushing me along.

Stone sculptures of mythical sea creatures—some I've never laid eyes on in the flesh—moss-covered and weathered by time, cower on pedestals as silent guardians. A meandering path of smooth pebbles guides us through the morbid gallery, leading us to a cliffside terrace adorned with twisted-iron furniture.

I sigh my displeasure as I'm steered past the terrace and into a suffocating hallway lit by black candles shaped like shrieking ravens. My bloody footsteps skid across the polished floor, and the prince actually bothers to steady me.

I square my shoulders. "Hands off, prince."

He lifts his palms away. "All right there, little bird. I'll let you fall on your face next time."

"My feet are bloody, you blackheart."

Prince Draven hums and looks down. "Why the bleedin' banshees didn't you say anything?"

I round my eyes. "You're kidding, right?"

He shrugs, and in an eyeblink has me lifted into his arms.

"Put me down!" I kick my legs and yank his hair.

As his head rolls back, he hollers, “Be still, you royal hag!” He strides down the hallway then while I can do nothing but lean into his shoulder and pretend I like the way his grimy hair smells like sea sludge.

“Oh, Prince Draven,” I whisper. “Prince Draven, Prince Draven, Prince Draven.” I blow my breath into his ear as I press my chin into his shoulder.

He twitches.

His nostrils flare.

He ignores me.

After several more turns, an entrance finally looms over us. Two guards, with first a confused look at the prince’s untidy state, push the double doors open.

I’ve been brought to a throne room. The ceiling soars high above, and chandeliers dripping with black wax and embellished with skulls hang low enough for a demon with antlers to become tangled in. The glossy floor looks to be made of gray sea glass, and in the center of the entire space is a pool of green water.

The glory of a sea goddess sits on the throne. Her body rail thin, her hair cascading down her shoulders and cloaking her body, which is draped in a body-hugging garment that flares about her bare ankles. Glimmers of jewels peek from her hair.

She has an ornamental scale on her sternum, shown off by the cut of her neckline. More sprays of scales across her exposed skin.

My mouth falls open.

Serafina, queen of vampires and demons, ruler of Soundless Shores, is a siren.

Prince Draven saunters around the pool, and as he does, the queen narrows her eyes. A crooked finger comes to her mouth in contemplation.

“Prince Draven.” She pauses as the room of spectators, of courtesans and lords and demons with horns and vampires with fangs, all turn to eye the prince. “You have brought us a most intriguing specimen,” she purrs as her palm rubs over the smooth handle of her throne.

I am then dumped unceremoniously onto the floor. I sprawl, my elbows and knees hitting hard. My chin just happens to find the only piece of sharp sea glass, and I instantly feel the sting and weep of blood.

As the prince makes a stately bow, I glare through my hair up at the sea witch.

Her arched brow and high cheekbones are familiar. Her well-defined lips I’ve seen before.

Draven drops to a knee. “I have brought more than the siren, Your Majesty.”

She cocks her head and simpers. “Indeed, Draven?” Her fingertips play over a low, wide bowl on a tiny pedestal beside her throne. I cannot see what the bowl bears, but she dips her fingers within its depths and lifts them away to let water drip from the tips.

Beside me, Draven flinches and tenses. The move is so imperceptible, but I sense it. Something about the bowl unnerves him.

“You have always been such a good boy.” The queen licks the water from a single fingertip at a time, trailing a black tongue along each twisted nail. “What have you brought us?”

He digs his hand into his pocket and pulls out my scale.

As he extends his palm, the queen instantly sits to attention, coming to the edge of her padded throne.

I’ve lifted my chin enough to get the lay of the room. Guards are at every entrance. Windows are glass but barred with iron, probably to keep fae from entering. No sense in me trying to make a dash for it. I wouldn’t leave without my scale anyway, and Draven would most likely command me to stop. The place reeks of blood and sweat thanks to the myriad bodies, and salt water and sea air due to the pool beside me. I lower my bleeding chin and glance at the gaping hole in my chest. It stings but glistens with freshly clotted blood.

“Draven.” The witch’s voice has lowered an octave. “Do not toy with me. Long have I coveted what you present, and I cannot believe what is so simply displayed.”

“You see the pathetic bit beside me. I grabbed her nexus scale, just for you, My Queen.”

With my head bowed, I hiss to the sea glass my palms press against, “That scale belongs to me.”

At this, the witch charges forward, her arm extended, and without even touching me, lifts me by the throat and holds me until I’m dangling uselessly in the air.

Draven makes no move. He stays on one knee with his head bowed.

“Such a pretty little thing,” she spits as she looks up at me. I choke as her magical grip tightens. “She has remnants of her father in her. Awful warm undertones to her skin.”

“You know my father?” I gasp.

She answers lightly, dismissively. “Did, once.” She lowers my body until my feet touch the floor. “That was long ago. And we do not speak of him.”

I draw a hungry breath of damp air. My hide already feels dry. I ache to slip into the pool beside me.

This close to the sea witch, I can see a subtle dewiness to her skin. Her perfect pores. A tiny black jewel that dots the

side of her nose.

She raises a brow as she appraises me. “Draven, she’s wounded.”

He growls. “I did jab my fingers into her chest to remove her scale, didn’t I? Not as if it’s gonna come away all smooth as silk.”

She tsks. “That is no way to treat a guest.”

He answers her as if he’s bored. “Would you like me to patch her up, Your Majesty?”

Queen Serafina looks to the side as if she’s considering. “She *is* bleeding all over the place.” She turns to the room. “I have been explicitly clear that I do not wish for your leftovers to be oozing all over the palace, have I not?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the room answers in unison.

She waves at me. “Come, child.”

When I don’t move, she tucks her head sympathetically as if in confederacy, and exposes her wrist by pushing back a satin sleeve. A beautiful wave of scales leaves the tender side of her wrist fleshy. With one of her long, twisting nails, she slices a short gash into her thick hide.

I gape at her.

“Come, drink quickly. My blood will heal your wounds.”

I snort and chuckle. “Your blood?” Siren blood?

The queen sighs with boredom. “You have three seconds.” The wound’s edges start to approximate. “Two” She follows the progress as her wound closes. “One.”

The gash is gone, nothing but a single bead of blood left, which the queen plucks off her skin with a dainty finger and licks off.

“Pity, my child. I only offer the blessing of my blood once every moon tide.”

“I don’t need your blessing. I need my scale.”

The queen turns to the prince. “Draven, my dearest stepson, rise.” As the prince stands, the queen starts pacing before her throne. And as she paces, my nexus scale rises from the prince’s palm and floats in the air high enough for all the room to see. “Dearest child.” She faces me. “Long have I been without a nexus scale of my own.” She whirls toward me and gestures at the scale embedded in her chest. “This one is a mere ornament reminding me of my birthright.”

My tone is skeptical, annoyed. “You are a siren. From Lunaris?”

“Yes!” Her chest swells, her attitude unconcerned for, or ignoring, my disrespect. “And yes!”

“Why are you queen of vampires and demons, then?”

“Your benevolent sea king banished me, after first removing my own nexus scale. In its place, this is what grew.” She gestures to her sternal scale once more. “A scale far removed from the powers the Abyssal Vortex bestows. Do you know what happens when a siren is without her nexus scale?”

“I have an inkling.” I haven’t been able to summon a thing since prince-boy here violated me.

“A siren without her nexus scale is powerless.” Her voice lowers. “Useless. She cannot shift. Cannot thrall. Cannot return to the waves from which she came.”

I push down the panic building in my chest. I will not allow this court of freaks to understand my alarm. “Can you not ask for your scale back?” My voice shakes. “King Nereus is forgiving.”

Queen Serafina throws her head back and cackles softly to herself. “Yes, of course, I will ask your father to forgive me for my numerous sins. I am sure he will return what is rightfully mine and allow me once more to be his queen.”

My brows bend. She knows I am a princess.

But it’s her final word that throws me. “His queen?”

“How are your six sisters, dear?” She presses a palm over her heart. “I miss them terribly. When I left, Marisynth had only just caught her first eel. She wanted to keep it as a pet, but she didn’t understand that it was to be cooked for the harvest feast.”

I draw a tight breath. I feel Draven’s eyes boring into me.

“And you were just a young fry. I laid eyes on you for only a gill’s gasp before you were torn from my arms.”

I start into a short, punctuated laugh, mostly from insanity than anything. “The Sea Witch. You are the Sea Witch who betrayed my father.” I abruptly cease cackling and lock scornful eyes with Draven briefly before glancing back at her. “And you’re my mother.” I laugh riotously once more. “Of course. And you want my scale to return to the sea.”

Queen Serafina brims with a suspicious smile.

I lean in as if I’m happy to comply. “Oh, of course, Mother. Take my scale! Return to Daddy. He will be so happy. Would you like me to stay here and rule as sovereign in your stead to keep these unruly demons in check? I can’t imagine you’d want Prince Draven to take over. I mean look at him. He got himself caught by a siren and dragged into the abyss, and King Nereus himself even declared he was worthless!” I mockingly laugh.

Prince Draven scowls at me.

I wrinkle my nose at him. “Stepbrother. You didn’t ever mention we were family. Where is dearest Step Papa? I would so

like to meet him."

"Dead," Prince Draven says, his voice as lifeless as his word.

I clamp my mouth shut. Prince Draven's tone tells me I am not to tread here.

Chapter 9
Draven

Meet Serafina's spawn. Just my luck. Knew she wasn't just a pain in the neck for the fun of it.

Isn't one uppity, entitled siren a handful? Now I've got a pair of 'em. Here's hopin' the queen and her little princess pack up and dive back into the abyss, takin' their drama with 'em. Then, maybe, I can finally have peace for a spell!

My lot's gonna seal off those wretched seas, keep a keen eye on the shores. No siren harpy's gonna set a foot on solid ground again.

I watch with utter disgust as her benevolence circles Leira's hovering nexus scale. I'm all battered up, knackered to the core, and that morning sun's pounding on me like a sledgehammer. The only cure for this mess? A couple of pints from my willing donors. Fixes everything, they do.

While the queen is undulating, starting into some ridiculous crow over her victory, little bit stirs.

The next moment, she's diving for her scale.

With the magic she has crafted over the years, Queen Serafina tosses Leira to the side, right into my arms.

"Hold her!" Her Majesty cries.

Leira puts up a fight, but I've got my arms wrapped around her torso. "Hey there, little sis, be still now."

She growls but relaxes against me.

"That's a good tyke." I nuzzle her cheek with my own.

"I'm not a child," she hisses.

Even though she's submissive, I keep her tucked tight to me, snug as a bug. Her lithe body is cold and slippery. She needs a decent nap, and a bath to get sorted.

Not a child, yeah right.

My want of blood makes my fangs slice through my gums. I can't drink from her again. I took a lot before. I satisfy myself by inhaling the bouquet of her blood along her jugular.

I immediately start coughing when the rancid scent of foul seafood penetrates my sinuses. "Ugh." I turn my nose away to escape the putrid assault.

"Serves you right," Leira growls.

The room around us has started to flicker with light, a prism of color that looks to be originating from the scale.

Queen Serafina kicks off this wicked chant, and before I know it, the whole room's buzzing with a siren song. That tiny scale's spitting out some enchanting vibes that makes my undead heart skip a beat.

Leira starts whimpering and melting against me as if her legs are gonna give out. "No. No. No," she mutters under her breath.

"Shh, little bird. This is for the best," I whisper to her.

"The best for who?"

"You'll see."

"Yes! Yes!" Queen Serafina exclaims, her arms raised to the heavens.

The scale floats closer to her chest. Bam! Outta nowhere, a blade materializes in her right hand, all sleek and deadly. As the room of beasties watches, she drags the blade along the top edge of her sternal scale and then digs it deeper to sever the connection to her skin. With a smirk, she then pries the useless scale free and holds it up like a trophy for the room to see.

"On these forsaken shores, I've languished in exile for countless years, assuming the mantle of your queen since the demise of the benevolent King Asmodear. The time for vengeance has dawned. Through the magic bestowed by my daughter's nexus scale, freely surrendered, I shall ensure that those who defiled our realm and robbed the king of his life shall face the reckoning they deserve!"

The cheers from her so-called subjects are nothing but a load of phooey. Everyone's just as eager as me to kick her and her web of lies off the docks.

Queen Serafina tosses her old scale at her feet. With her human magic, she floats the nexus scale forward until it meets her chest. The room is filled with siren song. The pulsing lights are more blinding than the sun.

Leira's got a death grip on my arms, and she's making this animalistic wail as if there's no tomorrow. I pull her in, giving her a squeeze to let her know I get it. "Come on, darling. Spare me the drama," I mutter.

"Please. Oh please!" she cries out.

I am the only one to hear her.

In that blasted cavern in my chest void of feeling, I kinda start to get this twinge of pity for her. In that cold emptiness, there's a tiny spark of feelin' or somethin'.

Somethin'.

I know what it is to have lost.

To the crescendo of deafening song and illumination, the scale fuses to the queen's sternum. She rolls her head back, the blaring symphony emerging from her own throat now.

With the rest of the room, I cry out as her siren song weaves its way into my skull. I lose my grip on Leira and crash down on my knees, doubled over as that gut-wrenching melody forces me to bow.

"Bloody hell!" I yell.

Leira's on her knees next to me, not 'cause I think the siren vibe got to her. She's just wobbly. Shaking like a leaf, shoulders dramatically heaving as she gauges my thrall.

"You did this, you stupid, arrogant prince!"

The pool in the room begins churning, bubbling, frothing like a wicked cauldron. Queen Serafina's dress splits open then, and as she dives in her human form into the pool, her legs fuse midair, and scales sprout along the solid mass of muscle. By the time she hits the water, her crimson fins have grown and flared out like some fancy gown.

After flipping about, putting on a show, she emerges from the depths, sending a spout of water raining down on those closest. Leira and I are sent gliding along the floor, once more drenched from head to toe.

Though I cough and sputter, as I rise to a knee, I bow my head to my queen, who has come to rest at the edge of her pool.

She's crowing and flipping her tail and basking in her new might.

"Leira, darling," the queen says, "your magics are utterly delectable."

Leira has scrambled up onto her hands and knees. She's struggling with all her might to even hold herself there. "I am so glad I could help you, Mother." Ice drips from her words, pure venom. She glares at her mother's bloodred tail, envy in her eyes, a hand over her own scaleless sternum.

"Leira, my dear, fret not." Queen Serafina touches the side of her nose like some snooty dame. "In three days' time, a new scale will grow. Granted, it won't be with the powers from your beloved Lunaris, and you will be unable to shift or sing a siren song or kiss unsuspecting sailors and drag them to their deaths, but it will do much to patch the hole in your spirit quite effectively."

"It will be worth nothing to me."

"But you will still be beautiful. You'll have your scales. Your physical allure. There is not a vampire or demon in this room who does not desire you."

She snorts. "All monsters thirsting for my blood. Your stepson included."

I raise my brows. But I won't disagree with her.

Queen Serafina hums and presses a fist to her mouth as if saddened by this news. "Draven, what shall we do with our littlest princess?" She leans forward on her elbows and appraises her daughter. The Sea Witch's voice is a silky murmur. "Oh, dear. You are simply exhausted. This will not do. You need your rest. I am certain you will think better of things then."

Leira draws a shaky breath. "Return me to Lunaris."

"Without your precious scale? How, pray tell, do you intend to navigate the abyss without your fins? How would you even dare to breathe?"

"Give me the siren's kiss, and I will do well enough on my own."

Queen Serafina shakes her head. "I'm afraid I won't allow that. I would worry for your safety. You are after all my daughter. I have loved you all these years despite being kept from you." She purses her lips, concerned, but her tail flopping about like a wagging pup's leads me to believe she couldn't care less about her daughter. "No, you had much better stay on land. I think Draven could keep you safe and acclimatize you to your surroundings."

I emit a grunt, pure disdain oozing through. "Your Majesty, the princess could do ya more good stickin' by your side as you gear up to plunge back into the abyss."

"Prince Draven, always so thoughtful and generous. But you have done so well, and I must reward you. Princess Leira shall be under your protection, and you can do with her as you see fit." She waves to the shadows and gestures a demon pawn forward. In his leathery hands is a crimson collar.

My eyes round. Leira sees him coming and instantly climbs to her feet.

With pain stronger than I can say, I send a wave of compulsion at her, demanding her to be still. She collapses to her knees, fear shimmering in her eyes.

Without even lifting her mane of clinging hair, the demon clicks the collar into place around Leira's neck, concealing the pulse in her throat from the hungry eyes of the room. The bright crimson collar instantly turns brown.

Queen Serafina turns to me. "Slaked your thirst already, have you?" She sighs as if exasperated. "See, daughter? The collar will protect you. No one will drink from you as long as you're not crimson. And you belong to my stepson. He is the only one who can touch you, seeing as he has already taken the liberty."

I scowl. "While I was swimming with the fishes, and I don't mean in a good way, I didn't know she was your bloomin' daughter."

"It is forgiven, Draven." She flicks her hand in the air. "Now take her away, and see that something is done with her stench. And put clothes on her. The sight of her scales tires me."

With an exasperated sigh, I stand. When my dearest sister doesn't move, I nod for two dismal ghouls to lift her and drag her after me.

"No. Stop this," Leira screams. As the ghouls lift her to her feet, she twists madly, fighting them. "Mother, please. Let me go. I beg of you, let me return to Daddy. You never have to lay eyes on me again. I'll do anything you ask, just don't make me go with Draven!"

Queen Serafina turns her head away. I give her a nasty glare before pivoting and striding from the throne room.

Leira fights the ghouls the whole way, and I let her have the satisfaction of the struggle.

Chapter 10
Leira

The strange wispy shadows hauling me after his royal unholiness shove me through into some living space, which is mostly draped in soft, dismal fabrics—which I imagine are fitting for a spoiled prince who likes his things gloomy and sullen. The prince then dismisses them.

While my chest is heaving, trying to recover my breaths, Prince Draven skulks over to some tufted piece of furniture, and after shucking his ruined leather covering and letting it fall to the floor, he collapses back onto the soft fabric, his long limbs draping over the edges.

He's still damp, and his lower coverings are falling apart. I think a piece of kelp is stuck in his mane.

"Well, what a right mess you've gotten us into, love." He shuts his eyes as if he's going to fall asleep.

I flex my claws. I still have the sharp talons, but the webbing between my fingers is gone. I still have my serrated rows of teeth, my protective scales over most of my hide.

I could do this vampire some harm.

So I don't give it a second thought. I shriek and throw myself over him, trapping him under me and sliding my claws right up under his throbbing jugular.

Draven's eyelids spring open. "Hold on now, little sis. I didn't think we were gonna play these games."

"I am not your sister." I hiss and bare my teeth.

He squirms underneath me, trying to slide back and sit upright, but I only let him go so far while keeping my pointed talons against his flesh.

"You have trapped me here. I do not like it. The place stinks. You stink." I tighten my grip on his throat.

"That's only because I've been nibbled and gnawed on, rotting under your putrid sea." His brows quirk. "And you don't smell so good yourself."

I snarl my words. "I smell like salty ocean."

"And dead fish." He shoves me back then so that I topple against the arm of the seat, our legs stuck in a tangle. "How about a bath, then? I don't suppose you know what that is, do you, since you're usually busy flitting about under the sea?" He narrows his eyes. "We run water"—he mimes as if I'm dumb—"into a basin large enough for a body." He gestures to his chest.

I glare at him.

His eyes rove over me, the pupils constricting the longer he looks. "You gotta stay damp? Like the queen? That's why she has her water pools dotting the palace, so she can take a dip whenever she fancies." He shakes his head. "Makes this place musty and fishy smelling." He untangles his legs from mine and rolls up from the furniture. "First things I'm gonna fix when she's gone, fill every single one of her bloomin' pools."

He sways across the room in some pompous two-legged swagger. "Okay, little bit. Here's the rundown." He points around the room. "This here's the common space. You can be in here, just don't go stinkin' the place up and getting your slimy secretions everywhere."

Repulsed, I scrunch my nose up at him.

He points to a room across the space. "That there's your room. It's a spare, probably meant for my bride or something ridiculous. You can have it until something proper is set up for you." He points at a door directly across from it. "My chambers. Stay out. Don't go poking your head in there. If you need me, stay out here and call for me. I'll hear you."

I stand and cross my arms over my chest. "Fine. Don't come into my room either. I don't want your gross…" I stop, unable to come up with a retort. With disgust, I growl and stride across the room toward my chambers.

Prince Draven cackles at me the whole way. "You can't think of a single thing wrong with me, can you?" He whips around me in some dizzying blur, faster than I can blink, to face me. "Like what you see, do you, princess?" He wiggles his brow as I scan his chiseled chest. I have no desire to look into his rich brown eyes because then I'll see the smug satisfaction written all over his face. "You like that I'm a prince. That I'm your stepbrother. Yeah, you fancy it."

"You're vile."

He shifts his shoulders, trying to emphasize how big and bad he is. "I'm more man than your fishie under-the-sea men will ever be."

"Let me make one thing explicitly clear, Prince Draven. You mean nothing to me. You are a mistake. I regret the moment I ever put you under my thrall."

"But you would do it again in a heartbeat if it meant you could control me."

"I would never. I never want to see you again." I pivot on my heel and move toward my door. Once beyond the threshold, I slam the solid wood behind me.

For the briefest second, I fight collapsing to my knees and succumbing to my state. My feet hurt, still bloody and soiled.

My hide itches. I need water. A pool of seawater.

I lift my eyes. The room is lighter. Softer colors and cooler furnishings. Simple like my undersea abode. A plain bed with smooth coverings. I almost exhale a sigh of relief.

Now to find this basin I can run water into. Another door opens from my bedchamber, so I enter the space. Yes, a basin. An empty basin. I fiddle with the knobs and pipes until a lukewarm stream rushes out. I don't wait for it to fill; I slip in immediately.

The water instantly becomes muddied. Red and brown from soil and body fluids, but I relish the comfort it gives to my dry hide. When it's finally deep enough, I sink under the surface.

The water is not salty, but enough of it leaches from my hair to mix into a brine, though that becomes quickly diluted from the fresh water running in. I work my hair out from the collar, irritated that the demon would trap my locks under it. As soon as my hair is free, the collar constricts, shrinking to rid itself of any remaining space between it and my hide.

It's entirely magical, then. At least three inches high. Soft and conforming to my neck. I feel along it, looking for a seam, and can't find one, but I do feel etchings. I pull at the edges, trying to rip it from me, but it won't budge.

With a massive exhale, I break the surface of the water, and lean over the edge of the basin, breathing in the stupid air that burns more than it should.

I have been collared like a pet.

I melt over the rim of the basin, my snarled indigo hair shrouding my shoulders. I feel utterly destroyed. My fate sealed like the clotting blood over my chest wound.

My chest wound! I no longer have a scale.

I have been violated!

Emotion pricks at my moist eyes. I will never forgive Draven for this. Never.

I try everything I know I should be able to do with my scale. I try singing, but not a tune slips from my throat. I try shifting to my siren form.

Not a thing happens.

My stick legs remain unfused.

I rub over the scales on my thighs and my backside. I smooth my palms over the scales slipping up my stomach and chest.

I am a proud siren. I still bear the remnants of who I am.

So I do not have fins. So I am trapped on land.

My talons bite into my palms as I clench my fists.

I sink back under the water and scream for as loud and long as I can.

My lungs fresh out of air, I slam my mouth shut.

Could I breathe water? It's not salt water though, and I have not had a siren's kiss.

The ache in my chest decides for me.

I open my mouth and draw in a soak of water.

The burn is intense. My vision blackens.

I cough, trying to expel the water, but my bipedal form wants air.

More water floods my lungs.

My body twitches, and then in a panic, I grab at the edges of the basin I'm in, only to have my claws slip away as I weaken.

I limply slide back, my body floating to the surface as I become powerless to do a thing to save myself.

Chapter 11
Draven

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" I bite my wrist, and as soon as blood bubbles up, I shove it into the princess's mouth.

I'm more than a mite irritated.

I'm having a good scrub in my tub when I get this pricking impulse to check on my stepsister.

I don't know why I should care, but the feeling doesn't leave me.

And here I find her face up and lifeless in her bathwater.

I've hauled the princess's limp body from the tub and tossed her onto the floor, which is a half-inch deep in water, by the way. She left the tap running full throttle.

When the motion of sloshing her about doesn't rouse her, I realize she's in more trouble than I pegged.

I turn her on her side and squeeze the water from her lungs, but still no response. "Oh, no. You are not going to die on me, bit!"

So vampire blood it is. She's too unconscious to drink on her own right away, but once enough of my life-giving elixir drips down her throat, she'll rouse.

She unconsciously begins slurping from my veins. They all do. Like breathing, it becomes automatic. "That's a good girl. Drink up." I'm swearing in my noggin as I stroke her hair. I'd hate to know what her mummy dearest would do if she found out her youngest little bit died under my watch.

Her eyes flutter open, and I wait for the moment she realizes I'm her savior.

Her body jerks, and as she rolls to the side, I remove my wrist from her lips. More water spews from her lungs.

As she coughs, she braces herself on the floor, her sinewy muscles over her scapula contracting against the force, her shoulders drawing up.

Finally, she collapses, her cheek landing in the water. Her eyes close, and she just lies there, defeated.

I slink back into the water all over the floor and lean against the tub. As Leira draws desperate and pained breaths, I sweep her mop of hair off her cheek and neck, and continue to stroke her head.

She doesn't fight me.

"It'll burn for a while, pet, I'm sure."

Only her lips move. "Please don't call me pet. Just because I wear this collar doesn't mean I'm your pet."

My fingers stop behind her ear. "You misunderstand me, love. Pet is just an endearment."

She shifts her thin wrist and flicks my naked leg.

In my haste to get over here, I didn't bother dressing, but I doubt Leira's caught on to my unclothed state, nor do I think she cares, not when her folks don't know what clothes are.

"I am not your pet." Her voice is drained.

"All right." I'll concede. "No *pet*."

"I want to go home."

"That's not going to happen."

"You don't want me here." She's absentmindedly brushing her fingers through the water on the floor, occasionally skimming against my thigh as she does.

I don't think she's aware she's doing it.

Not liking the way her restless fingertips are coiling compassion into my gut, I draw my knees to my chest. "No, I don't."

"So help me get back home."

I stare at the side of her face. Her eyes are closed. She doesn't mind a bit lying in this water. Probably feels right at home and would sleep until nightfall. "The only way that's happening is if your mother goes first."

"Why?"

"Why do I want her gone?"

"Yes."

"Because she's a murdering liar who has me by the balls, and I can't do anything to stop her." There, I've said it. Leira at least knows I hate Queen Serafina. I mean she's probably already picked up on that vibe.

Leira giggles, dreamily. She's losing her battle with consciousness, and she actually sounds right adorable. "By the balls?"

I gaze with frustration at the ceiling. I can't let her get to me. Can't soften toward her. "She murdered my father and took his crown. I was just a wee lad back then and was taken into hiding. Thought I could live my life in peace, but she found me, and forced me to come back to the palace."

"Hmmm…"

"All right." I stand and then stoop to hoist her up and sling her over my shoulder without a hitch. She comes without a

fuss. I carry her, all limp and dangling, from the soggy bath and into her bedchamber. After settling her back onto her bed, I spread her sopping locks around her on the pillow so they'll dry. I'm pretty sure she's asleep, so I take my time arranging her limbs so that she'll wake without a crick in her neck.

I'm floored that this girl—I'm trying not to think of her as a woman—is the daughter of the siren who married my father. I barely remember the bloke and wonder what he saw in someone who had razor-sharp teeth and claws. Sure, Serafina's got some beauty, but it's the kind that gives me chills, and there's no doubt Leira takes after her.

I trail a fingertip over the tiny swirl of scales that's across her clavicle, moving smoothly in the direction they grow. Most of them are as tiny as my little nail or smaller.

I stop when I meet the pink flesh where her sternal scale was. That scale was many times the size of these smaller ones and more like a pendant necklace, only fused to her instead of hanging on a chain.

My blood has already done a remarkable job of healing the wound.

I pinch my eyes shut.

The wound I gave her.

"I'm sorry, Leira, really," I whisper.

Losing her nexus scale is better than losing her life. Better to be powerless and alive than chum thrown to the sea.

I check the rest of her over. Her thigh muscles are thick and powerful, but it's those scales that really grab me, like a magnet to steel. Her skin is fully covered with them over her hips and upper thighs, clear up to her navel, but then the pattern thins to nothing over her knees and calves, with a bit of decorative circles over the tops of her feet.

I check the bottoms of them. Healed. It didn't even cross my mind that she wasn't bouncing back, especially with all that rough terrain we were trekking through. I felt like a right jerk when I realized she wasn't healing like a vamp, not as I did after sipping on her potent blood.

Leaning in closer, I clock her features. Those lashes? Blue, resting as if they've been laid out in a coffin. Lips? Slightly parted, inviting trouble. Strands of hair? A tad unruly, but it's working for her.

Her nose? Cute and maybe a tad rebellious, even in dreamland.

It's all kinda... stirring something in me.

She's my stepsister, you dolt.

"*Sister*." I say the word as if practicing.

It does not fall easily from my lips and not without conflicting emotions.

If I can't get her back into the water, would I be able to endure her presence?

I shake my head. "Abyss no."

Leira shifts then, making me start back, and rolls onto her side.

I've lingered too long. What the bloody hell am I doing in here?

I fold the blanket over her body and tell myself one thing.

I am for darn sure not following in my father's footsteps. I will not fall for any siren's allure.

No way in hell.

Chapter 12
Leira

As soon as the door snicks shut, I toss the covering off and spring to my feet.

Why did he have to be so gentle? Why did he act as if he cared?

I'm sorry, Leira, really.

Am I really going to believe him?

"Sorry for what?" I hiss under my breath. I wouldn't want him to somehow hear me if he's just beyond the door.

I scan my body. Test my feet. Flex my muscles in my arms and legs.

He healed me. Completely.

"This does not make any of this okay."

I pad about the room, taking in the array of items on a long wooden piece of furniture with compartments and handles. One of the items looks like a comb with long thin tines, much like my comb crafted from long thin shells back home.

I work at my tresses while pacing, picking out seaweed and debris when the comb snags on them. I need a plan. The rest of Lunaris is probably just going to sleep after partying all night. No one will notice I'm gone until they rouse. And once they do, will they suspect that I've been taken to the surface?

Daddy will try to use his connection to my nexus scale to locate me, but he'll only find the Sea Witch.

That will at least lead him to believe I am on land.

He'll come for me. I press my palm over my barren chest. When my new scale grows, he'll renew the connection to the Abyssal Vortex and I'll be able to go home.

I have at most three days to wait. Maybe less if Daddy can give me a siren's kiss so I can breathe under water.

Please, Daddy, realize I'm missing.

I just have to endure this wretched place until then.

Draven didn't command me to stay put, so I pull open another door across the room. It opens to a hallway. I tremble as I glance down the dim interior.

No one is about. No guards posted outside the prince's door?

It is daytime. Perhaps the vampires are all asleep.

In just my bare feet, I step from my room and square my shoulders, pretending I belong here. My mother is the queen. I am a princess. I will not sneak about.

The floor is covered with thick carpet my toes sink into. It is nothing like anything we have in Lunaris; we have mats from woven sea fibers. I brush my fingertips along the painted walls. The dark red color is painted with a decorative pattern of gold and silver.

I retrace my steps to the throne room. Here, a few guards mill about, giving me thirsty gazes. One of them grins and flashes me his fangs. My palm instantly goes to the collar at my throat. I'm relieved it is not bright red.

"Where is the queen?" I ask with sharp words to a young lady dressed in stiff shiny black.

"At the beach, Princess Leira," she says. "In the water, swimming, as a siren."

I round my lips, feeling stupid. Obviously she would want to swim in the sea—with my nexus scale. "Oh, that makes sense." I'm surprised she hasn't just gone straight to Lunaris to enact her revenge.

"Do you need anything, princess?" the guard asks. "Can I help you with something?"

"Nope." I take two steps toward the throne, but then turn. "Actually, what's the routine around here? Where is everyone?"

"The vampires have retired to bed. Not all of us have daylight rings, so most of us are nocturnal. The queen holds court at dawn and dusk because of this. She prefers daytime hours, so once she returns from the shore, you will find her about the palace."

"I see."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry about this morning."

I scrutinize her face. "Are you?" I can't make out her fangs or extra-large black pupils. I wonder if I were to cut myself if that would be a different story.

"Of course. Although I do have to say no one wants the queen here. Everyone, myself included, would have done exactly as Prince Draven did. Because of your nexus scale, we will soon be rid of her. We will be free."

"Am I supposed to forgive him, then, because he acted for the benefit of his people?"

"I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that your sacrifice is recognized."

"So… what? You'll write stories about me? Erect statues in my honor?"

The guard shrugs. "Maybe."

"Wow. That's so comforting." I turn my back on the vampire and stride across the throne room. My eye lands on the pedestal with the bowl. Curious, I glance about, and seeing no one to stop me, I rush forward.

It's a bowl of water.

Huh. I stare into its depths.

There's nothing at first, but the longer I gaze, I begin to think there's something in the bottom of the bowl.

I squint at an image that forms. I make out two people, a man and a woman. They don't look like demons or vampires, but they do move about on two legs, and are dressed in clothes with thick leather aprons.

Humans?

I scratch my healing sternum as I study them. The male lifts a heavy hammer and brings it down hard onto a piece of glowing metal. Sparks fly as he does this over and over, sometimes stopping to submerge the metal into a bucket of water, which makes steam rise into the air. As he works, the female projects a stream of magical energy from her fingertips, which goes into the metal.

So not humans. Magic wielders.

I don't know how long I watch them for. They work in a hypnotizing rhythm, occasionally stopping to switch to other tasks, or to switch duties with each other.

"Travers and Mavis," a low voice says behind me, "my foster parents."

I jerk so abruptly I hit the rim of the bowl and water sloshes out.

The prince blurs forward and steadies the bowl.

"Draven!" I exclaim, my hand coming to my chest.

"Didn't fancy a nap, eh?" He shakes his head. "Can't leave you alone for a second, I swear."

I don't look at him, but I feel his eyes boring into the side of my head. "Why can I see them in this bowl?"

"It's a scrying basin. Serafina uses her witchy woo to spy on them."

"Why would she care about your foster parents? Are they powerful?"

He shrugs a shoulder while nodding. "They could hold their own against fae. They're powerful iron mages who can infuse magic into iron. Fae don't like iron."

"I know that." I scowl at him. "Are your foster parents a threat to the queen?"

"I'm a threat to *them*," he says bluntly.

"Huh?"

"If I don't behave like the good little pet I am, she'll off 'em. She keeps their images here to remind me of my duty and what she could do should I screw up."

I lift my face to his. He's looking down at me, his pupils zigzagging as he takes in all my features.

"You don't believe me?" He leans down, his lips defined as he emphasizes his words. "You think I want to help the witch? Let me tell you, sweetheart, everything I do is in my best interest, not hers, all for them." He points at the basin. "It might look as if I'm falling all over the queen, but she's without."

Confused, I scratch my scalp above my ear. "Without what?"

"Without… everything. Without a decent bone in her body." He scoffs. "Do you even get this? We're all prisoners to her whims. She rules with an unyielding grip, all for the sake of herself and what she wants."

"And that's not what you would do?"

He starts back. "Of course not. I may be a pompous vamp, but I would never let power go to my head."

I roll my eyes and scoff. I want out of the stuffy throne room and away from him, so I square my shoulders back and stride away, past the guard who spoke to me earlier.

Draven follows, barging after me with his long legs cloaked in black fabric. At least it covers his flesh and nothing is poking through. He's without his leather sheath, but his top half is draped in silver linen that cuts low to show off his curly chest hairs.

I shudder.

"Hey, bit." He keeps pace with me. "Where're you going?"

"Away from you."

"You should put some clothes on before doing a walkabout, yeah? Too many prying eyes."

"I don't wear clothes under the sea."

"Yeah, but it's different up here. You don't want demons ogling… your shape." He gestures to my chest and navel. "Especially an Infernal. They see something they like, and they will suck every bit of life force from you."

"My scales cloak me. Earlier, when we came into the throne room, I saw demons with just their scales. They don't wear clothes."

"Yeah, but they're animals, most of them. Completely savage. And for beasties like that, it's either fur or scales that completely cover all the sensitive bits. You got skin on display for all the riffraff, and it's a mite tempting."

"You mean it bothers *you*."

He scoffs, twice. "You're royalty. Valuable. Precious. You should be adorned in finery like some snobby princess."

Just as we're to a set of outside doors, I whirl on him. "You don't care that I'm valuable. I'm not precious to you!"

“Maybe not, but you’re my responsibility. If I screw this up, someone will have to pay. My fost—”

“Your foster parents will be killed. Yeah. Yeah.”

“Yeah!” Pain coats his word. “They’re the only parents I remember, love. You can understand that, right?”

“Yeess.” My word comes out in a guttural hiss. I despise that this prince is making me feel compassion because his situation isn’t ideal—

Despise that my entire life I grew up without a mother and now only find out she is cruel and abusive and has been within reach this whole time.

Daddy told me she was dead. Died giving birth to me.

Now that I think about things, it’s peculiar that no one has ever spoken of her, that my sisters don’t mourn her. There are no statues. No royal histories mentioning her.

It’s as if she was stricken from memory and replaced with stories of a vague sea witch, someone who betrayed Daddy and was exiled—and who was no relation to my mother.

I curl my lips back and bare my fangs. With a breathy hiss of disdain, I shove the doors open and stride onto the terrace from earlier.

I’m immediately hit with fresh sea air and a bracing wind.

I can’t conceal my gasp of relief.

The terrace is quite large and extends all the way to the edge of the cliff. I run to the waist-high railing and press my stomach into it as I throw my head back and shut my eyes.

Up here I finally feel as if I’m not being suffocated by my stepbrother and his oppressive palace.

I contemplate diving for my freedom, but one glance tells me the height is too great. The ripples of the sea are barely discernible from here.

The wind sweeps my long tresses off my back. Gazing at the horizon, I spread my arms wide and let the cold fingers of the elements sweep over me until my hide is flecked like pyrosoma flesh.

With a great sigh, I cast my eyes toward the shoreline, to the left of the terrace and far, far below, where the sands gradually meld with the sloping rocky hill that leads up to the rear courtyard. An entourage of the queen’s men loiter on the beach. Occasionally I catch the queen surfacing and cackling with glee.

I scowl, and debate whether I hate her or her stepson more.

I don’t realize I have an audience until Draven steps up, with his back to me, and extends his arms. “Come on now. Nothing to gawk at. Go about your business. The princess is just taking a tour of the palace.”

I jerk back from the railing and peer around Draven’s shoulder. A red, horned creature is on his hands and knees, scratching runes into the terrace floor with a sharp instrument. Another blue, slightly sticky-looking fellow has paused from adding blue flame right from his palm to a lantern. A tiny brown thing with a mop and bucket follows behind to swipe up the larger fellow’s secretions.

I grimace.

All of them have paused to stare at me.

“What are they doing?” I whisper. Why is the red fellow marking up the floor? Is that other guy holding fire?

They all wear some sort of apparel, whether it’s cloth about their loins or a robe.

Draven doesn’t bother to turn. “Enhancing the palace’s protection. It’s a daily thing. Orivelius here”—he points to the red creature, whose right tusk is chipped—“scribes protective runes into the floor. It’s a never-ending job, yeah?”

Orivelius bobs his head.

“And Andelsis keeps the warding flames burning day and night to keep burrowing nipsies away. They can do some mean damage if they get into the walls.”

“Spelled the walls of the west wing so that pictures and tapestries wouldn’t hang right.” A yellow bubble bursts on Andelsis’s wrist and gunk drips to the floor. The little guy in brown darts forward and wipes the ooze up. “Couldn’t figure out why things were crooked and falling off the walls.”

Scarcely able to hold in my disgust, I cringe back behind Draven, and the gawkers return to their work.

Draven turns and glares down at me, and as if we’re alone, he gives me a scathing glare. “Now, are you gonna start takin’ me seriously or are we just gonna bicker like a couple of bloody fools?

I grunt. “I’m just a novelty. It’s not because I’m not wearing clothes.”

Draven grabs my hand, but I don’t budge when he tugs on me. “Come on, little bird. Don’t make me compel you again. I know you don’t like it.”

“I shouldn’t be treated like this. I’m a princess. The queen’s daughter.”

Draven pokes me several times in the forehead. “The sooner you get it through your thick skull that being the queen’s daughter doesn’t mean diddly around here, the better off we’ll both be.”

I smack his hand away.

He counters by grabbing my jaw and jerking my gaze to his. “Let’s try this one more time, stepsister. This is my turf.

You're gonna obey me. You're not gonna even piss without my permission, you got that? You're gonna march your prissy hide back to your room and put on a nice gown, yeah?" He's so inflamed he's spitting. "Something that covers all your bits." As he pauses, his nostrils flare. "And you're gonna like it!"

He shoves my face away and saunters off. "Crimson!" he yells. "Someone get me one of my crimsons before I tear the princess's throat out!"

Several people on the perimeter stir. A tiny little thing with a bright red collar scurries out of the shadows and follows the prince.

Okay. What a jerk.

My feet suddenly have me moving faster than I wish back toward my room. I fight the urge, even grabbing hold of several tables I pass, and knocking vases and candles to the floor.

"Curse him!" I barge through my bedchamber door and find a woman laying out clothes on my bed.

She wears a collar too, and it's a faded red, which I take to mean she'll be feeding a vampire as soon as it brightens up. "Your Highness, I've been assigned to you as your maid. Prince Draven's orders."

I flash her an artificial smile.

"I'm Lysandra."

I nod at her collar while fondling my own. "Are you one of his?"

"Yes."

"And how does that make you feel?"

She smooths her palm over the silky fabric of a gown. "Prince Draven is the best master to have, out of all the kingdoms. He's gentle."

My eyes bulge. "Really?"

"Most assuredly."

"Do all the other kingdoms have, what are you called, crimsons?"

"Yes. Those of the ruling class do. Not all humans are blessed to be protected by becoming crimsons. Without the collar, any shadow creature is permitted to feed, and many lives are lost this way. Our masters protect us. Keep us warm and well fed."

I straighten back, scarcely able to believe her. "Do you all live with your masters? How many crimsons does the prince have?"

"Several dozen. We board in shifts at the palace. In a few days, I will be crimson, and Prince Draven will drink from me, and I will return home to my family while I recover. In the meanwhile, I serve you and him."

"I see. Am I to be one of his meals then since I wear this collar."

She glances up. "I would assume so. I have never heard of royalty wearing a collar, but from what I've heard from the queen's commands, it is for your protection."

"They sure have a funny way of emphasizing it. My protection? Ridiculous!"

"You get used to it." She gestures at a blue fabric. "Let's try this one. It meets all the prince's requirements."

"I'm not going to like it."

"You'll grow accustomed to it."

I scowl. "Not likely."

Chapter 13
Leira

The gown is puffy and prickly, as if I was swallowed by an inverted sea urchin. And smells like musty, old textiles rotting in a forgotten treasure chest. The high neckline begins at the collar on my throat and descends into sleeves that flop about my elbows like jellyfish tentacles. Unfortunately, the material ends in a constricting cuff just over my wrist bones. And though the bodice is fitted, the skirt billows over my hips like a pufferfish.

The shade of the blue gown is varied, and splotchy, as if someone spilled squid ink and tried to fix it with bleachbloom serum.

I look like a shipwreck.

After a storm.

I love it!

Deep inside I know I loathe it. Loathe having my scales pressed against, loathe the way it brushes roughly over my hide.

Curse Draven and his compulsion!

I swish the skirts and smile.

Lysandra declares it a most fetching ensemble, not that she would argue with Prince Draven's selections.

I'm certain she's delusional.

From the looks of things, the other gowns are not much better.

I want to wear them all!

Even though my skirts undulate with the freedom of an aqua seraph, I can barely walk because there's just so much fabric. My coordination is worse once Lysandra slides hard pieces of fitted hide onto my feet.

I wobble on the two-inch heel.

And growl.

"I love it!" I exclaim for the tenth time.

I'm certain he told me I would only *like* the nice gown that covers all my bits.

Well, I'm covered.

"It's a lovely outfit," Lysandra says with an approving nod. "Now, I should really go. I have a list of chores to do that's never ending, but if you need me, just use the summoning conch."

I blink my eyes. "The what?"

"The pink conch on your bureau. Speak the name of the person you need into it, and your request, and they'll be notified."

"Notified how?" I swish my skirts again, pondering how I can get rid of this most beautiful garment.

"A wee conch whisperer will mutter the request into my ear."

"What is that?"

Lysandra gnaws on her lip, the puzzlement all over her face. I can tell she's wondering how I got this far in life. "This slimy little snail thing that crawls up onto my shoulder and tells me when I'm wanted."

"Ew. It crawls up your shoulder? Why?"

She shrugs. "That's just how it is. You wouldn't have noticed them scuttling about the palace. Fast devils and darn near uncatchable." She hangs the remaining gowns in a wooden structure with hinged doors. "You have night clothes in the bureau, and some other selections."

"I already love them just as much as this gown!" I frown as she exits.

Once alone, I bow my head and blow out a steady and frustrated breath as I press my fingers into my forehead.

It's been too long since I've slept, but I'm not sure how I can now that I'm in this restrictive gown, and I'm famished. I'm almost afraid to traipse about the palace though. Draven might come after me again, or I might stumble upon something more unsavory than a conch whisperer.

I wander out into the common room, scratching at the thin line of my hide just under my collar and above the gown's neckline, still amazed that Draven has not bound me to my chambers.

"Stupid boy." I pluck at the tentaclelike sleeves and then abruptly trip, turning my ankle in the things Lysandra called shoes.

"Ow!" I flop over onto the floor, my skirts billowing around me, creating a cushion that does not stop my hands from thumping hard on the floor. "Well, we're not keeping these contraptions on. He didn't say I had to wear them."

After defiantly pushing my hair from my face, I yank the shoes off and toss them across the space.

They land with a thud near Draven's door.

While I'm rubbing my sore ankle, I ponder what he's doing and where he could be.

Is he sleeping?

He did tell me to stay out, but a strange inkling to investigate his domain swells inside me.

I use the nearby tufted furniture piece to climb to my feet. The first footfall on my twisted ankle throbs. This surges through me an intense urge to maim Draven.

Yet, a silly sensation draws me to him. I smile, feeling strange as I hobble across the room.

I want to see him. Want to know more of him—

What his lips taste like after a sip of moon-kissed nectar, mingled with the essence of midnight roses.

Say what?

I pause outside his door.

Oh, no. He's in there, I know it. And his cloud of compulsion is pulling me.

I shiver.

Eek! He wants to know this of me? Or he wants me to want this for myself? That I should want to know what his lips taste like after some moon-kissed nectar and some rose essence?

I'm so confused.

He's my stepbrother. And an icky vampire.

My accursed hand lands on the doorknob.

Fight this, Leira!

I can't. I slip quietly into his darkened chambers.

The room is pitch black. I can't see a thing. I slide and limp. Slide and limp. My movements are slow across the vast space. My chest tightens with anticipation, and when I hit the wooden frame of his bed, my breaths are barely coming from my lungs.

I'm going to kill him.

If I end up kissing him, I will strangle him directly afterward.

"Oh geez. Oh no. Come on, please," I whisper as I feel around the bed. From what I remember of mine, it's wide and deep. Fluffy bundles of fabric indicated the head of the bed, so I use this understanding to guide me.

I hear his whisper-quiet breaths falling in a steady rhythm.

So Prince Draven is asleep.

Does he dream?

This relaxes me, only a trifle. He can't control his dreams, so he may not want what I'm feeling.

I blow out a controlled breath as I bump into a piece of furniture beside the head of the bed. A little table.

"I'm going to flay you, Draven," I whisper and flex my claws.

Somewhere on the bed, he shifts. "Yeah, Leira. That's the way Daddy likes it."

Fear from his dreamy voice cutting through the silence makes me drop into a crouch beside his bed. I wait until no sound comes from him, but as I do, I drag my talons through the skirt of his bed linens.

That's the way Daddy likes it?

I make fake retching motions.

I soon realize the urge to kiss him has left. His dreams must have shifted. Relieved, I lean my forehead against the soft, stuffed expanse he lays upon. Small miracle. As soon as I return home, I'm consulting the oracle cephalopod to see if he has a charm that makes me immune to vampire compulsion. I don't care what price I have to pay. This is never happening again.

There's a sudden thud when something flops over the bed's edge and lands next to my cheek. As my heart ricochets around my chest, I lose my balance and topple onto my butt.

I lean back on my elbows and let my head fall, and as I do, my view of the ceiling tells me I have a modicum of dark vision; my eyes have adjusted.

There's an arm hanging over the bed.

Prince Draven has tossed himself onto his stomach and his arm is just temptingly dangling there as if he's on a dinghy and I'm a shark in the ocean.

Ah, and what's this?

A gaudy jewel is attached to his middle finger. The round stone in the center glows softly.

A moon pearl!

Is this his daylight ring?

I don't have another thought besides taking that ring. With a determined stare, I narrow my eyes as I carefully work the adornment from his limp appendage.

I have a bit of a hard time with the first knuckle, but after that, the ring drops lightly into my palm.

Oh, yes.

I slide the ring into my gown's bodice. Let him find it there. Then I scooch backward until I clear his bed. After some effort and fighting my adorable, though excessive, skirts, I'm back on my feet and limping out the door.

Prince Draven is a somewhat heavy sleeper.

I press my hand over the ring in my bodice and smile.

Let’s see him come after me with his ring missing and the sun shining.

Chapter 14
Leira

I can barely push the terrace doors open, but when I do, I see why.

The sun is not shining.

The world outside is gray chaos, the wind blowing fiercely. Dark clouds hide the horizon, casting a brooding shadow. The air crackles as gusts of wind send the dune swaygrass, along with my mane, into a wild dance.

Though I can't see them, the waves crash with a rebellious roar I can feel under my sternum. The sky is a canvas of electric flashes, illuminating the roiling clouds in shades of indigo and silver. Rain descends in a rhythmic cascade, creating a shimmering curtain that blurs the line between the terrestrial and the ethereal, and speckling my heavy gown in seconds.

"Princess Leira!" The female guard dressed in shiny black runs up to me. "It would be best for you to remain indoors. The queen is practicing her storm command."

"The queen's doing this?" I shout over the raucous.

The guard holds an arm up to shield her face. "Yes, it is advisable that you stay inside!"

"I'd rather face Prince Draven's wrath than stay here another second! Storms do not frighten me."

"It will be Queen Serafina's wrath you'll have to face, not the prince's."

For a moment I pause, recalling Travers and Mavis in the scrying bowl. If Queen Serafina caught me out in her storm, would they pay?

I can't allow the prince's plight to soften me. This storm could be the perfect opportunity to escape.

Though I know not to where.

With a huff of confliction, I spurn the guard and run onto the terrace, my bare feet slapping the cold slate.

The only way I know to go is the rear door.

Which leads to the path of razor-sharp rocks.

This may be a mistake.

Still, I lope at an uneven pace, allowing the raw energy of the storm to fuel me into ignoring the dull ache in my ankle.

This could have been my power.

I could have done this.

I will tear my nexus scale from the Sea Witch's chest if I have to.

Yes, that is my purpose.

I duck under a spinning branch. I try to dodge a rolling palm nut, but my skirts have already clung fast to me and my limited movement makes me stumble right over it.

I splatter into a puddle of grimy water, tearing the right cuff of my gown so that it would hang free if it wasn't for the rain pasting it to me.

"I will not allow this to stop me." I shred my sleeves until they are in tatters around me. "My gown," I wail as I rip it apart.

I really loved this gown.

Shut up!

I scramble to my feet, and once up, continue my flight, stopping every few steps to drag my talons through the skirts, removing one piece at a time.

At the rear door, I tug on the handle.

Nothing budges. At first I curse the wind, but then I remember the creature in the wall with the curly tentacle.

I pound on the wood. What was his name? "Larkspurt! Larkspurt! Open up for me!"

An eyeball juts from a crack on this side. "Iiff you can guesss my name, I will let you passs."

"Larkspurt!"

"Noo, pprinncesss. That isss not right."

"Luckspicket."

"Wrooong again!"

"Licketysplit!"

The eyeball doesn't answer.

"Oh, please, come on. Please don't keep me here."

The eyeball sucks itself back inside. I rattle the door a few more times, but with no success.

There must be another door out of the rear courtyard. Sure, this way is the beach access, but maybe I can exit somewhere else and work my way around. Maybe find a path less sharp.

I work along the edges of the sculpture garden, and finding no hidden door, no alternate entrance, I end up back on the terrace and at the mercy of the storm. I hug the railing that peers over the edge, hoping to spot the Sea Witch wielding the

might of my nexus scale on the beach.

Chapter 15
Draven

A storm's howl jolts me awake from my daytime kip. I haven't had nearly enough shuteye, and I'm as irritable as an emberbeast. With one snap of my fingers, the joint's magic sparks up, setting all the candles and lamps ablaze at once.

I stagger to my feet and snatch up a decanter of blood juice from my nightstand. The crimson concoction slides down my throat, taking the edge off the dryness, but as I tip the glass to my lips a final time, something's noticeably peculiar about my hand.

My daylight ring is gone.

I've been sportin' this thing since the day I turned, ever since this witchy bird weaved her magic into the moon pearl with my own vamp blood.

I grit my teeth, annoyed as hellfire. No vibes of the darn pearl in my room. Refusing to admit I've been a complete idiot, I hurl my covers to the floor, run my palms over the sheets, and drop to my knees to look under the bed.

My bed skirt is in shreds.

Long, spindly ribbons as if someone dragged their talons through the fabric.

Oh, Leira, love, you did not.

She pulled my ring from my finger, and I didn't even notice.

You wouldn't, you dolt. Not with the dreams you were having.

No, not dreams. A screwed-up fantasy.

Leira's really crawled beneath my skin. I'm at a loss, can't wrap my head around the sheer depth of loathing I've got for her.

The irritating truth's like a stake in my heart, screaming that it's the flippin' opposite.

I'm definitely still riding the wave of her siren mojo. No doubt about it. She may be without her nexus scale, but there's a measure of natural allure that clings to her the way my compulsion clouds around me.

None of this is savory.

A string of colorful swears flies from my lips as I grab my nearest collared shirt. I don't bother with the buttons. I do slip into snug black pants; gotta make sure the goods are secure.

I don't have time for anything else. Leira could have already done something daft like toss my ring into the sea.

I barge through the palace, trusting my gut, my intuition tied to the pearl in my ring.

A real rager's going on outside, enough to quake the walls, which means I'll have cover from the sun. I doubt this is some unseasonable hurricane. Must be the queen's doing. She's not one to sit on her new powers. Knowing her, she's liable to bring the palace down while she has her wicked fun.

Naturally she'd wanna raze this joint to the ground before she leaves.

If only I could get my mitts around her neck.

I burst through the rear doors, and there she is—Leira on the terrace, right at the Enchantress's Peak, so named because of how often the Sea Witch would gawk at the toss of waves and wish for her old home.

Gonna have to slap a new name on the point there. Something like Dead Demon's Drop is a mite more fitting. More spot-on, considering the heap of nasties the queen's tossed into the murky abyss.

I can barely see through the storm, yet I creep along, 'cause I don't want to frighten Leira by my abrupt appearance. She's looking desperate, all rain soaked and gripping the railing and leaning far over as if she's trying to peer into the ocean's depths. I'm not sure what she's about to do.

Something completely idiotic.

She has what could be a gown plastered to her body. Well, bits and bobs, that is. The blue clings to her scapulas and adheres to her hips, making them look lumpy. The skirt has seen better days. Long pieces stick to her thighs.

I almost laugh.

Her creamy calves tighten as she lifts onto her tiptoes.

Then a leg stretches over the railing. And another.

Until she's clinging to the metal from the other side.

"Oi! Leira, love!" I amp up my vamp powers and blur across the terrace. I reach her just as she pivots and dives headfirst over the edge. "No!"

I don't think. I throw myself after her.

I'm on her heels, wondering how I could possibly soften the blow that will shatter every bone in her body, and just grab the slippery devils when this scaly monster from the deep launches from the roiling waters.

You have got to be kidding me!

A cavernous maw, all teeth and no charm, opens to swallow us. I grab the remains of Leira's skirt and pull us together just

as we scrape past being ripped apart by its nasty row of white beasties. We slide down a bumpy tongue and bounce against the monster's palate, barely dodging a one-way trip down its throat.

Its chompers close, and we're choked in darkness.

"Leira!" I just have time to holler as we're shifted again and tumbling against the row of clamped teeth. Some ruddy bony thing slams into my face, and I immediately feel the river of blood from my nostrils. "Damn it!"

We tumble once again and end up sprawled on the beast's tongue, which I take to its leveling off after its plunge into the sea, probably swimming us to our watery graves. Leira's beside me panting and grunting.

I fumble for her and throw her onto her back. "What's this game now, sister!" I pin her wrists to her sides. "Did you plan this? Does this beastie work for you?"

"Get off me! Gaw, what's dripping onto my face. Why is it warm? Gross, Draven. Get off!"

The way she spews her venomous revulsion makes me let her go. I slump back on my haunches, trying to act as if I wasn't just spilling my blood all over her, and casually pinch my nose.

This is just fantastic. Fine, flippin' fantastic.

She must smell the copper notes of the blood, because then she's sputtering and gagging. "Is this blood? Were you bleeding on me? Ugh, Draven, you are so revolting."

"You're what busted my nose, love." I let go of my nostrils. The blood flow has clotted off, and I'm already patching up.

She springs at me, quick and dirty, enough to send me stumbling backward and landing squarely on my butt. Then, she pulls back, prowling in circles around me. Thanks to my vamp vision cranked up, I catch a glimpse of her sleek form in shades of gray.

"We're inside a leviathan," she says with awe in her tone. "I bet Daddy sent him for my rescue."

"Your rescue?" I sputter.

For some reason, the notion of that really stings.

Leira moves toward the beast's pointy row of teeth. She presses her palms to two of them, right around an empty space where a tooth should be. "Levity Luciathan? Is it you, old fellow?"

The entire oral cavity rumbles as if the monster's answering her.

She trembles with excitement. "Did Daddy send you?"

The beast rumbles again.

I groan. "This is just fantastic! Didn't I say I never wanted to set foot in Lunaris again?"

The tone in Leira's voice tells me she doesn't care. "He knows I can't swim to him. Daddy knows something has happened. Does he know about the Sea Witch?"

The leviathan rumbles again.

I push to my feet and sway toward my stepsister. "Listen here, bit. I can't go there again. I just can't. You gotta tell beastie here to spit me out onto the beach."

Leira stands and whips around to meet me. "It's your fault you're here! I'm not telling Luciathan to turn around. I doubt he would listen to me anyway. Daddy's probably using his nexus power to control him."

"Yeah, 'cause he stole a beastmaster's power during the harvest, and discarded his corpse like a callous git!"

"I can't help that!"

"But you don't tell Daddy dearest to stop harvesting our people!" I holler.

"It's how we are!"

"Oh, it was just the way you were brought up, was it?"

"You drink blood!" she screeches.

"I'm a vampire! Blood's my go-to! It's kind of who I am, love. Without it I would wither away, I'll have you know."

"And we use demon powers to survive."

"But you could do it without them, couldn't you," I say.

Leira scowls and crosses her arms over her chest.

Leaning in, I'm caught up in the thick of our argument. "You can, can't you!" I roll my shoulders back. "I knew it!"

"Our people were once only sirens, nothing more than savage creatures scavenging the seafloor for our next meal, until we evolved and discovered we could be striders by imbuing our nexus scales with power. There are so many benefits of having two legs."

"So you haven't always had a crusty dome over Lunaris, have you?"

"The Lunaris you know has been this way for centuries," she says. "I don't know another way."

"So shifting has never been innate."

"No."

"And your siren song?" I ask.

"No."

I scoff. "I see. Whereas, drinking blood keeps me going. I don't add to anything I haven't already been given."

"And that makes me a monster? Because my people do?"

"If the dress fits." I blatantly scan her body from head to toe, but I doubt my effort has its effect; I'm not sure she can see a lick in the dark.

Leira slaps her scaly thighs. "Oh, you just think you are so funny."

"You just figuring that out? There's a lot you don't know about me, bit."

Leira claws at the fabric around her hips. "Tell me I can take this stupid, ruined gown off." She winces and then bites her lip in a most adoring way that has me all tied up in knots inside. "I'll put another one on, I promise."

She slaps her palms over her mouth.

I press my lips together to keep from snickering. "You like wearing them that much?"

She nods, but then immediately shakes her head.

I roar with laughter. "I'm kind of sorry I didn't get a chance to see it in its glory, you all tucked in and huffing about like an angry storm cloud."

She pivots then and slugs me in the gut. "I hate you, Draven!"

I round over the surge of pain, clutching my sides. "Keep it up, little fishie," I gasp, "and I might just fall in love with you."

She makes a grunt of dismay. "Don't make me vomit."

Inhaling sharply, I gulp down some air, fingers working over my belly to soothe the ache. She packs quite a wallop. "I fancy my ladies with a bit of spark, you know? Gutsy ones, not the type to just keel over and surrender."

"*Ladies*?"

"There's been a few."

She rolls her eyes. "I think you'd go for anything on two legs that tastes good."

I grin. "Yeah, you got me there. I have courted a few demon beasties. That gets a mite tricky. Logistics and all."

"Ew. I would rather not know." She paces away, carefully making her steps over Levity Levia-something's tongue.

I rub my bare foot over the leviathan's tongue. The air's a bit stale. I'm thinkin' this beastie hasn't had a good throat gargle in a while. "What's this beastie's name? What were you calling him?"

"His name is Luciathan. He would distract the scallop keepers with his silly antics and send them on fruitless quests, claiming they would return with treasures and renown, but he basically just wanted to lure them into his cave and force them to watch his stand up."

"Stand up?"

"Jokes. Why did the siren bring seashells to the party?" She doesn't bother pausing. "Because she wanted to have a shell of a good time!" Leira giggles softly.

I scoff and harrumph, hating that I wouldn't mind hearing her laugh more often.

She twists her hair between her hands as she shifts about. "The constant stream of sirens to his shows left the scallop beds wide open for the Shadowfin Marauders to raid. Daddy didn't like that. There was huge backlash, and a fight, but in the end, they worked out a suitable time for his shows that wouldn't mess up the shifts at the scallop beds. Anyway, Luciathan earned the nickname 'Levity,' and it stuck, so that's who he is now."

Leira doesn't look as if she's gonna sit still, so I just stand here and track her with my eyes, wishing she would stop it with her twisting hair and her swaying hips and biting her lower lip. When I can't stand the gnawing ache that's built in my gut, I huff out, "So what now, princess? Are we tuckin' in for a long ride?"

She shrugs. "I guess so."

"Just peachy." And even as I say my words, I want to kick myself. "Trapped in this dump with a siren straight outta the nastiest pit." I wince, but gotta keep the angst between us or I'm gonna crumble. "Can't wait for King Nereus to have another go at snapping my neck and tossing me to the fishes. Cheers for that."

Leira halts and slides down Luciathan's cheek to rest against the squishy flesh. "Does that hurt?"

I'm stunned she would care to ask. "Snapping my neck? Bloody better believe it does! Just because I have unending life doesn't mean I don't feel all the pain." And just to really make her feel guilty, I add, "That spear to the gut wasn't too pleasant either."

Her body stiffens. "I'm really sorry about that. I was angry."

This attracts my interest. "Why's that, love?"

"Because I'd made a fool of myself. I let Daddy down, and even though he was trying not to make a big deal of it, I could tell he was disappointed in me. I didn't exactly ace Demon 101."

"That's because I wouldn't be on the curriculum, now would I? Vampire, bit. I was a human once, never a beastie."

"You were?" she asks.

"All of us vamps were human. When we come of age, we're sired—turned. My mum and dad expected me to become one someday, to become like them."

"So they had been human."

"Yeah, and because of the curse and how it works, though we become undead, we function like humans, only better, with powers and stuff. We breathe. We circulate blood. We do the nasty." Leira quirks a brow as if she has no idea what I'm talking about. "We have human bodies and souls. We just can't die permanently." I shrug. "Well, we can, but it's not easy. And we need blood to sustain our bodies. That's the whole curse bit."

"Curse?"

"From the vampire's bite. It's in our venom. Serafina dragged me from my foster parents as soon as I was old enough to be turned. She forced me to change. Made me go through the whole shebang—the ceremony, the entire bit. Wasn't exactly on my wish list, you know? After my parents died, I was all in for sticking around with my foster folks."

"Why would the queen do that?"

He shrugs. "She's all about showin' off, making it look as if she's got me wrapped around her finger. Gotta prove she's the one pullin' the strings, as if I'm some puppet in her game."

"And now I'm your puppet."

And there's a kick in the nuggets if I've ever felt one. "It can't be helped, love. I got others to think of. Not just my parents, but the whole kingdom."

"Whatever," she hisses. "I get it. You're cold-blooded. Spineless."

"I did save your life, didn't I?"

"By feeding me your blood!"

I huff. No thanks I see. "You would have died without it."

"I did die!"

"No, bit. You were still there. I stumbled upon you in the nick of time. Timing's my specialty, you know?"

She snorts. "You could have let me die."

I frown. "I would never have done that."

"Why?"

It's just on the tip of my tongue, but I can't make myself say it.

"Why?" she presses.

"'Cause I had to."

"Why?"

"You're gonna make me say it?" I ask.

She just glares. Can she see me in the dark?

I growl, and then drop to the tongue and flop onto my back. "Because I care." I slide my hands behind my head. "You happy? Big bad Draven has a soft spot."

"Yeah right."

"Don't go broadcasting that around now, bit."

"What's that mean?" she asks.

"What? Bit?"

"Yeah."

I sputter, trying to come up with a response. Finally, I spurt, "It's just something I say! Like *love*, *girlie*, *sweetheart*."

"Does it mean you like me, all of those?"

I crunch upright. "No!"

She huffs. "All right."

I sigh and grope across the tongue to slide over next to her. "You're my sister." Keep lying to yourself. "You get that, right?"

"*Step*."

"That doesn't matter. We're in this together against the evil mummy dearest, yeah?" I nudge her shoulder.

"All right," she says. "Fine. Yeah, we are."

"So you're gotta listen to me, huh? She's dangerous. And you don't know anything about the vamps and demons on the surface. Our world is brutal. Cutthroat."

"You don't think my world is?"

"I'm sure it is," I say, "but it's different up there. You gotta trust me. Stick with me, and I'll keep you safe. I can help you."

"You're gonna help me now?" Suspicion fills her tone.

"Just as soon as Serafina's gone or dead. I don't care. I'll help you get your powers back."

"Are you just saying that? Empty promises?"

"I swear," I say.

"Why hasn't someone taken her out?"

"She's too powerful. While she was with my dad, while I was a wee young thing, she was practicing her dark arts, biding her time until she was powerful enough to kill him. And she's been consuming vampire blood for a while now, which makes

her wicked strong."

"Vampire blood?" Leira asks.

"Yeah. Gives her enhanced senses. Healing. She's nigh untouchable. Something about how she mixes our blood with her magic allows her to take on our traits."

"Really?"

"Yeah," I say.

"So no one has wanted to touch her or even try?"

"No one."

"And Travers and Mavis?" she asks. "You suffer her presence because of them."

"Yeah, I do."

She shakes her head.

"So can you at least admit that I'm not as vile as you originally thought?" I ask.

"Oh, no. I still think you're vile."

Chapter 16
Leira

Prince Draven thinks he's just so smooth. Well, I'm not buying what he's selling.

I'll just make him think I am. Sure, we can work together.

Until I get my scale back, and then I gut him, and never have to look at his sun-bleached locks again.

Draven rests his head back against Luciathan's cheek. He hasn't budged from beside me, his shoulder still resting where he'd nudged me. With shallow breaths, I lean carefully away from him until I'm free of his warm flesh.

His breaths even out, and I think he's sleeping—until Luciathan shifts abruptly, and I'm tossed against Draven and smashed to his chest, and we're rolling over Luciathan's tongue.

"What is going on!" Draven shouts as he holds us together until we come to a stop. "Funny caravan this is!"

I scramble off Draven's hard chest, making him grunt and tense when I hit something squishy. "I think we turned."

Luciathan groans. I hate that without my nexus scale I can't understand a thing he's saying, but I at least get that he agrees with what I've said.

"We're headed back to shore?"

Luciathan grumbles.

"Serafina," Draven hisses. "She caught wind of Nereus's little caper here to save daughter dearest, and she's turning the tide on him. Her nexus scale—"

"My nexus scale," I hiss.

"—can do the same mojo, right? She's calling Luciathan back to shore." From the stir of air, I sense that Draven has flipped to his feet. "Oh, we're in for it. There's gonna be hell. What am I gonna tell her majesty to save my neck, and my foster parents'? This looks shady as all get out."

"Oh, so it's all about you again."

"Leira, we don't have time to argue. I mean you're welcome to think what you want, but I'm gonna spin this so we both come out on top."

I scowl. "How?"

"You gotta trust me. Don't take to heart a single thing I say or do up there, all right, 'cause I can't help you if Serafina sends me to the abyss. Yeah, you understand that, right?"

"Okay. Okay!" I fume and stagger about.

Luciathan is swimming with haste, and he's gulping back saliva, which makes his tongue toss us about.

How am I going to wrestle my scale from Serafina? Can I even get close enough? It would be better if I made it to Lunaris so Daddy could help me.

Can he not come to shore? Confront Serafina?

"Why don't you think Daddy comes himself?" I ask Draven.

"Maybe he knows he's no match for Serafina on her turf. He might have been hoping to draw her back into the sea to engage her down there."

"But she will return, eventually."

"She's readying her men," he says. "There's gonna be a battle. I think she's just getting used to her powers, and then she'll attack."

I hum in frustration.

Draven lingers close enough that I can feel his cool breath.

"You could give me space!" I screech.

"How old are you, Leira?"

I whirl to face him. "Huh?"

"You seem a bit naïve."

"Naïve?" I pace away.

"You don't bag your demon," he says. "You find me instead. You don't have all those markings your sisters do. They're some sort of status thing, aren't they?"

"And what if they are?"

His persistent voice moves closer. "How old are you, bit?"

I thrust my lower lip out but feel Draven's restless, demanding eyes looking me over. "I'm sixteen years old!"

Prince Draven lets the swears fly. "You're just a baby! I should have known. Serafina has only been queen for thirteen years. I was six when my father was murdered by her. For three years she was his wife, but she baited him before that." He swears some more. "I am an idiot. She did say you were torn from her arms; I just didn't know it was right after she'd had you. I didn't make the connection."

“So? I’ve been trained as a warrior. I’m strong. I was ready to come to the surface. You were a mistake. A most regrettable accident.”

“I’m never an accident, love.”

Of all the ridiculous things to dwell on? Why should it matter how old I am? I expel a frustrated breath hard enough to vibrate my lips. I won’t allow this vampire to make me feel inferior.

I ignore Draven and how infuriating he is. After moving over to Luciathan’s row of teeth, I press my palms to a single tooth and say, “I’m sorry the queen’s telling you what to do. I know Daddy asked you to come for me, and I can’t tell you how glad I am that you did. But do you think that once you spit us out on the shore, you can come back? Stay close, and when Serafina’s off the beach, we can try again for Lunaris?”

“You can’t really think he’s going to—” Draven says.

Luciathan bellows, shaking his entire oral cavity.

I stand, and with a smug expression I hope Draven can make out with his vampiric powers, I say, “I think that’s a yes.”

Chapter 17
Draven

Leira's revelation about her age throws me for a loop. Sixteen. Bloody hell. I've been treating her as if she's older, thinking of her as a woman.

Dreaming about her.

But she's just a kid, a siren babe barely out of her underwater cradle.

As Luciathan hurls us back to the shore, I can't help but feel a pang of guilt for dragging Leira into my world. The games, the treachery, the haughty queen—it's a lot for someone who hates my guts.

For someone who just found out who and what her mother is.

Who still needs a mother herself.

I growl and shake my head.

I'm a real royal jerk.

I rub the back of my neck as I grapple with my conflicted feelings.

Leira and I fall into tense silence. She's swirly as she paces. I crouch with a palm resting on Luciathan's bumpy tongue, bracing myself for the toss. At the speed he's going, it'll be any moment, and I'll have a princess to catch and a queen's temper to subdue.

Luciathan gives a great lurch, and we're tumbling.

"It's now or never, princess!" I holler.

When she pitches against me, I hold tight to her narrow waist.

The leviathan breaches the surface, his maw opening wide. The gray skies greet us.

Then, while whipping his head to the side, Luciathan belches us, or rather tosses us with a hack and a tongue thrust, out beneath the deluging clouds.

Leira screams as I tuck around her and we catapult through the air. The waves clash beneath us as Luciathan belly flops into the deep. The storm is starting to fizzle, which doesn't look good for me. Dodgy clouds are spotty on the horizon, and if I don't get my daylight ring back, I'm toast.

We rotate in the air, and I land with a crack on the sand. There's a bit that's definitely broken. A rib or two at least. A peculiar pain shoots up my rear end, and I know I've broken my coccyx. Pretty sure I thumped it on a rock.

After a great big oof, Leira collapses against my chest. I'm instantly worried she's got the daylights knocked from her.

With a curse, and a grimace, I paw at her body, checking her over. "Leira! Leira! Please tell me you're all right."

It's much too long before she manages a mewling groan and nuzzles her nose into my bare chest. "You're so dang hard. You should have let me hit the sand."

I grunt, and for some bizarro second, hug her to me, which is instantly a mistake. "Ow!"

"Draven?"

"Just a bit broken, love. Watch the ribs, yeah?"

She starts to scramble off me, but there's movement all around us. The queen and her lackeys closing in. I have to look as if I have the upper hand, busted bones or not.

I quickly flip Leira, sending a string of curses through my brain. She's cradled beneath me, looking up at me with round, frightened eyes that are the deepest, most beautiful purple I've ever seen. Her chest swells beneath me as she tries to control her breaths.

I fight hard not to become transfixed by her beseeching orbs.

"Trust me," I whisper before Serafina draws too close and can hear me.

Leira bites her bottom lip as her eyes shimmer. They're so innocent and questioning I can hardly work up the courage for what I have to do next.

Leira doesn't give me a signal. Doesn't say she trusts me, but the rain has petered out, and the clouds are breaking apart, and Serafina's striding toward me in her scales, more starkers than I've ever seen her. She's never been without clothes. Never dared show her scales before today.

Before Serafina gets sadistic ideas to do anything like pound me into the sand, I push to my knees over Leira.

She doesn't have a moment to blink. To ask me what I'm doing.

With one smooth maneuver, I tear the remains of her bodice open, the long threads giving way down her sternum.

Lying between her little siren swells is my daylight ring.

I knew it was there, calling to me the entire time we were inside the beastie.

Above the ring is the tiniest rim of iridescent purple growth where a new scale has begun pushing through her skin.

Leira's face twists with anguish, brokenness. Her brows contort. Her eyes track over all the features on my face until finally looking with piercing intensity into my eyes.

Why? they ask. *How could you?*

I deserve the wretched painful breaths of my cracked ribs scraping across my lungs. I compelled her to like wearing clothes when she was the one who didn't care if her scales were showing.

The violation is etched onto her face.

Queen Serafina glares down at us, having just witnessed my display. "Prince Draven, this is most unusual, but I must say I'm glad you have returned. Imagine how I felt when I learned you had run off with the princess, *my daughter*, and you were on the way to Lunaris." Her voice becomes light, her usual guise of indifference, which means she's masking a world of spite and vengeance. "Can you even conceive what I must conclude of this whole convoluted mess?"

"The princess," I gasp with a tight breath as I stare down at her, "ran off with my daylight ring, Your Majesty. I simply went along to retrieve it."

I pluck the moon pearl off Leira's sternum and slide it onto my finger, the display all for Serafina, and none too soon. The clouds break, and the remaining evening sunlight streams down upon me and little bit.

Queen's Serafina's brows lift. She's not buying the act.

I grunt as I scramble off my stepsister, and with a single hand, yank her by the elbow up beside me. She stumbles and ends on a knee, her toes lodged into the damp sand as she dangles from my grip. Every last bit of her gown slips from her, and she's down to her seductive scales with nothing but her hair shrouding her.

"And this little minnow…" I say, referencing my sister to the queen. "Thought you wouldn't want her slipping off, now, yeah? Wouldn't want her to go and tell Daddy your big plans."

"Get your smelly vamp paws off me!" Leira yells. She jerks on my grip, but I work past the pain squeezing me and tug her to her feet.

I add a solid grip in her hair, my fingers digging into her scalp, and pin her other arm behind her back.

She pries at my hand and tries to twist out of my hold. "I'm going to harpoon you, Draven, and feed you to the sharks!"

"Really now, Draven." The queen tilts her head as if amused. "Let Leira go. I'm sure you can find another game to amuse yourselves. Perhaps something a little less aggressive?"

I make a show of drawing my hands back. As soon as Leira's free, she turns and kicks me in the shin. I pitch forward and land on my hands and knees, grinning like an idiot at the sand where Serafina and Leira can't see.

Cut it out, Draven. Just because she can dish what you serve doesn't mean you gotta be all twisted up in the feels.

"Get her back to the palace and put a dress on her!" Queen Serafina suddenly bellows, making my head shoot up. She's glaring at her daughter. "I will not have her disgracing herself."

No. I won't force Leira into a dress again, won't have her feel the shame I've caused. I stand. "Her scales are fine, yeah? Leira likes 'em, don't you?"

Her eyes widen as she shakes her head almost imperceptibly.

I put the force of my compulsion behind my statement. "You do like them, bit."

Leira straightens. Stiffens as she cocks her head. She's confused, drawing tight, shallow breaths, gnawing on her lip. I take a step toward her, but before I can grab her jaw to compel her with greater precision, a buzzing tune plays like a broken fiddle through my brain.

Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.

I freeze and study Leira. She's narrowing her eyes at me, so I mouth, "Is that you, love?"

"Is what me?" she says out loud.

I exhale with exasperation and flutter my eyelids. Little pet is gonna get us in big trouble.

Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.

I clap my palms over my ears. "Oi, Serafina!"

Her blasted pitch intensifies. *Oooh, O, lah. Oooh, O, lah. Ooh, lah. Aah, O, lah. Aaah, O, lah. Aaah, oooh, O, lah.*

"Quit the witchy mojo, yeah!" I whip around to face her. "What's this about? You got me, don't ya? Your obedient servant fetching whatever you command. No need for the warbling!"

She sways toward me, and her mouth is suddenly spewing a dismal tune.

"Heed my beckoning call, across the sunlit sprawl,
A sea witch's thrall, an enchantment's ancient drawl.
The shadows lurk and leer; you soon have much to fear.
You, my princeling dear, must face what's drawing near."

I fight against her thrall, wailing like a bitter banshee, but as Serafina bears down on me, the power in her tune forces me to my knees.

"No. No. No!" Leira cries out. "Leave him alone!"

I collapse belly down in the damp sand, powerless against the might that demands I submit, and only then do two of her vamp minions cart me up and begin dragging me away.

Serafina's words return to their inane sounds. *Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.*

I can barely lift my head to see the look on Leira's face as I'm pulled along, my heels tunneling through the sand, my shoulders limp, my elbows creaking.

Her tiny chest is heaving. Her mouth is gaping with horror. Her fists clench up into tight balls.

That's my girl.

Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.

I wail as pain lances my skull.

"What are you doing?" Leira screams as she rounds on her mother. "He had nothing to do with any of this. You know that. Daddy sent the leviathan. Draven just wanted his ring. I took it! It was my fault."

Little bit does care.

"Relax, Leira." Queen Serafina waves her hand. "Draven's just being taken in for a bit of polishing, you might say. Discarded and broken sea glass must be tumbled and churned about in the waves until the sharp edges wear away. My abrasive actions and erosive force will wear him down in time and his natural agitation will subside."

Polishing? I snort. That's a laugh.

Leira pounds with a palm on her chest, right over her budding sternal scale. "I'll take the polishing. Me."

Serafina's men halt, as if wondering if the queen will consider the princess's suggestion.

Leira's words knife me, slice right through my midsection, leaving my emotions tumbling across the sand for the little crabbies to gobble up.

"The gesture is sweet, dear," Serafina mews, "but you could not withstand the tempering. Not such refinement as Draven's accustomed to."

Translation. Torture. Because I'm a vampire, she can torture me to an inch of my life, and I'll return from near death, my body begging for more.

Leira does not need to know this.

Oooh, O, lah. Oooh, O, lah. Ooh, lah. Aah, O, lah. Aaah, O, lah. Aaah, oooh, O, lah.

The naïve little princess does the unthinkable then. She grabs her mother's hand and drops to her knees as she begs.

"Enough of this!" Queen Serafina proclaims as she yanks her hand away. "Take her from my sight."

Another set of guards hauls her upright. The poor bit will never stop being shoved around.

Before they can drag her forward, and before I'm taken away, I do the last remaining thing I can for her. With the entire force of my command behind it, I scream, "Leira, I release you!"

My wave of compulsion hits her like a punch to the gut. She draws a sharp breath and drops to the sand.

Satisfied little bit's no longer held to my wishes, I let Serafina's thrall pull me completely under.

Chapter 18
Leira

I hate him. I hate him. I hate him.

But I can't leave him.

I pace my bedchambers. Lysandra has come and gone with a food tray, and I've eaten and drunk my fill.

I soaked in the basin filled with water and salt.

I put on a frilly sleep dress.

Not because anyone commanded me to.

Because I feel horrible, horrible guilt.

What do I do?

I wring my hands as I pace.

Night has fallen. Serafina has retired, I'm told. I should be out on the beach, waiting for Luciathan to pick me up.

I can't leave Draven! What must she be doing to him?

You don't care about him.

He released me. I'm not beholden to his compulsion, but I owe him.

You owe him nothing!

He took my scale. None of this would have happened if he hadn't taken my scale.

You took him to Lunaris.

I cry out as I sink to the carpet and round over my knees. I did this. I rock slowly. Had we never met, all of this would be different.

Go, Leira, you fool. Go home.

I lose my fight with myself and with exhaustion; sleep pulls me under.

I wake I don't know how much later, drenched in sweat from ceaseless nightmares. My body is stiff from sleeping with my limbs twisted up on the carpet. Since the room is still dark, telling me it's not yet daylight, I roll upright and snap my fingers, illuminating the space the way Lysandra taught me.

This would have been nice to know earlier when I was sneaking into Draven's room.

Groggy and shivering, I pull the garment closet open and slide myself into a purple gown. This one is every bit as extravagant as the first and has many layers that will keep me warm. The sheer sleeves puff out over my shoulders. The fabric flares at my hips so that they are twice their size. The color matches my hair, my eyes, swamping my pale hide with dark, inky hues.

Should I feel like a princess in this gown?

What would Draven say about it? I'm confused. He wanted me to cover up, but then he said that I like my scales and shouldn't.

Wearing the gown would please my mother. Draven would suffer less if I didn't anger her.

I swallow and swish across the room, but then stop when something flashes across my vision.

Alarmed, I peer into the mirror.

My collar is bright red.

Terror lifts through me. How? Lysandra said it takes weeks for hers to go from brown to red.

How did mine do that in a day?

I fly over toward the rectangle thing Lysandra called a bureau, pull out a long piece of fabric, and loop it around my neck above my high neckline until the collar is covered. I will not let any vampire snack on me.

Vampire, as in Draven. My face melts with sadness. Why hasn't he come to pester me?

Maybe he has returned to his room!

I hurry from mine and across the shared chamber. I don't even bother knocking on his door. I push the wood open and barge into the black space.

Snapping my fingers shows me the room is empty, his bedding rumpled from his last slumber and slashed from my talons.

I hiss.

It's still night; he's awake. That has to be it.

A pink conch shell on his bureau gleams at me. Feeling foolish, I race over and scoop it up. "Lysandra," I yell into the opening, "I need to find Draven!"

A soft voice comes from the depths of the shell. "You don't have to yell. I know I'm hard to wake, but that was entirely uncalled for."

I scream and drop the conch. Whatever is inside lets out an oof. Then this brown, squishy creature scurries from the recesses and races out of Draven's room before I can really see what it is.

“She didn’t say the shells were inhabited!” I shriek.

Unsure what to do, I return the shell to Draven’s bureau and head back to the common space.

Lysandra bursts through the doors then, out of breath, tying the strings of her simple green dress. “The conch whisperer said it was urgent, that you were yelling at him.”

“You didn’t tell me they live in the shells until I made a request!”

“I thought that was obvious.” She staggers over to me, her eyelids heavy and her eyes puffy. “You need to find Draven?” Her collar is red, just a shade from glowing.

Mine is glowing, telling every vamp I’m a hot meal!

I whimper. “He hasn’t returned. The queen led him away for ‘polishing.’”

As if my statement hasn’t fazed her, Lysandra lifts her hands to my neck. “Why is your collar covered?” She tries to find the edges of the material, but I bat her hands away. “You can’t cover it! It’s against the rules.”

I pace away. “It’s crimson already! I thought I would have weeks.”

“It must be because you’re a siren.” She follows my bare steps with her eyes. “You needn’t fear. Draven’s the only one allowed to drink from you, but if the queen sees your collar covered, someone will be punished, and it probably won’t be you. It will be Draven, or his family, or me—because I’m the one who helps you dress.”

My heart pounds, making me lightheaded, but I quickly unwind the fabric. The crimson is so bright in the dimly lit room I sense the glow around my neck, and glaring in my eyes, and bouncing off polished surfaces.

“Draven is the only one who can?” I ask. “And you’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“He drinks from the wrist? Because the first time, he bit my lip, and it really hurt, and my lip swelled…” I trail off. “But I had stabbed a spear through his navel, and he kept drowning, so maybe I deserved it.”

Lysandra presses her lips together in horror. “Princess Leira!”

“His body was half rotted and falling apart! It was so gross. I thought he was kissing me after I gave him the siren’s kiss, but then he bit me!”

“While I don’t doubt that it was intentional—he probably saw an opportunity to get blood when he needed it—it was probably also instinctual. At a certain point, a vampire’s body will react. A vampire would attack anyone if he needed blood. And your lips were right there, available, and he was falling apart…”

Dismayed, I press my fingers to my mouth and squeeze my eyes shut. After stepping around the room, pondering just how horrible we actually have been to each other—but not without reason—I pause and lower my hand. “You really say he is a nice master?”

“The best.”

“He has a temper.”

“He hasn’t always,” Lysandra says. “Queen Serafina has pushed him to his limits. I live in the village where his foster parents reside. I knew him growing up. He requested me as one of his crimsons to keep me and my family safe. He knew he had no choice when the queen brought him here, but he’s made the best with his situation.”

“And this has all been okay with you?”

She nods.

“Then we need to find him,” I say, “because the queen took him away and I just know she is doing something terrible to him.”

“I know exactly where he is.”

I blink incredulously at her. “You do?”

“He is the Crimson King, the monthly sacrifice taken by the queen to be drained of all his blood so she can then imbue a vampire’s essence into herself.”

Take his essence? The way sirens drain power from demons. No wonder Draven doesn’t like me. The queen he despises is just like my people.

My body deflates as I’m just starting to grasp how dire a situation he’s in. “Crimson King?”

“That’s what they are all called who are chosen.”

“Chosen? Like a sacrifice? So she’s going to kill him?”

Lysandra shakes her head. “Far worse. His body descends through a state of rapid deterioration, where the final state is desiccation. His veins collapse. His muscles dry out. His skin will become shrunken and tight over his bones. For a while, it’s incredibly painful, until his nerves die. He will become an undead skeleton but will be unable to move.”

I gasp. “But he won’t be dead?”

“His spirit is forever tied to his body because of his curse, so he will never truly be dead.”

“So he can still think? Doesn’t his brain shrivel up too?”

“After the last time, he told me that his spirit just kind of hangs out with his corpse until someone comes to revive him. Then he snaps back inside and begins the painful reanimation process, regrowing muscles and nerves. Patching up arteries

and veins."

"Oh," I whine, thinking just how terrible it must really be. The worst sort of torture. "How do they revive him?"

"By giving him blood."

Obviously. "How many times has he gone through this?"

"At least half a dozen times. Queen Serafina claims his blood is her favorite."

"He just lets this happen!"

"He has no choice," Lysandra says. "His foster—"

"His foster parents, I know! He has a bigger heart than I gave him credit for."

Lysandra smiles. "He does."

"We have to go to him now!" I grip Lysandra and shake her shoulders. "Take me to him!"

Chapter 19
Leira

Lysandra leads me through the bowels of the palace, down cold stone stairs, past musty passages, through corridors with moaning and groaning creatures held against their will.

At last, we come to a room with a high ceiling, a cavern of sorts. It's ornamented, with runic symbols, and a great big stone altar in the center—over which hangs Draven.

He's shackled in silver, hanging by the ankles, his arms dangling alongside his drooping head. The only article of clothing barely hanging on to his body is his pants.

His bare torso is slashed open in several places and streaked with glistening blood that has dripped down his body and his face, staining his platinum locks a sinister red.

His muscles have already shriveled. His skin is dry and leathery. I can barely make out the facial features I know and loathe.

He's a skin-covered skeleton.

I cry out with a sad little squeak.

The altar beneath Draven is carved like a basin with a trough leading from it. The stone is damp with what's left of Draven's blood.

"They've already come to collect it," Lysandra says as she hurries over to where the chain is secured to the wall. "The ceremonial collecting vessel is not here. Queen Serafina will already be preparing his blood for her consumption."

"They took what they wanted and just left him!" Seeing what Lysandra is about to do, I rush over to help lower Draven, although I doubt his emaciated body is heavy.

The two of us manage just fine to lower him to the altar, but I'm moaning and whimpering over every sway and spasm of his contorted body.

He's still in there somehow. Still feeling something.

"Help me get him off this." I won't leave him on this vile altar a second longer.

We kneel around him once he's on the stone floor. The gashes on his chest are fresh, wide wounds that have not clotted off. Instead, they weep what little blood he has left. The many creases in his leathery skin are stained with his drying blood. Darker rivulets indicate the thicker paths of blood that ran down his body to his stained fingertips.

"They use vampire venom to keep the wounds open, but as soon as he starts drinking, he'll begin healing." Lysandra sticks out her wrist. "You'll have to bite me. Draven can't do it himself. Your teeth should be sharp enough and will work just fine even though they don't contain the venom that keeps the blood from clotting off."

I nod and reach for her wrist. "Here?" I point to her blue veins.

She nods.

I can't say I've ever bitten human flesh hard enough to draw blood, but I don't want to keep Draven tied to a stiff, contracted corpse any longer. "I'm so sorry, Draven," I murmur before sinking my teeth into Lysandra's wrist.

She sucks air through her teeth, indicating she doesn't relish the pain, but as soon as my mouth pulls away, she's milking her arm, coaxing blood from the punctures that together are shaped like twin crescent moons.

As the blood runs down her wrist, she holds it over Draven's gaping mouth. I'm anxious and patting my palms over his dried-up chest. "Come on, Draven. Come on."

I can hardly see a speck of skin not smeared by his own blood. "How long does it take until he starts drinking?"

Lysandra lowers her wrist to rest against his lips. "Just a little longer. The reflex to drink will begin as soon as his mouth hydrates."

A few minutes later, Draven swallows. His cheeks move. A muscle in his jaw subtly flexes.

I exhale with relief and push on his sternum. "You idiot Draven. This is the last time this happens." His eyelids attempt to flutter as if he understands me, but they stick to his face and halfheartedly twitch instead.

Good. I can still irritate him, which I'll take as a positive sign.

Slowly, his facial features fill out.

Lysandra slides his head onto her lap and shifts so he can drink better from her wrist. Her collar has already begun to fade to brown. "He's going to need a lot more blood. It usually takes four crimsons to fully restore him. When he's done with me, I'll run out and get some more."

"I'm bright red! He can drink from me."

Draven lets out a vibrating rumble that sounds full of dismay.

I grab his knobby hands and twine my fingers with his. "It's fine. Better you than some other creep."

His other arm twitches as if he's trying to raise it. His head shifts side to side. Lysandra moves her wrist. "Draven?"

His cracked lips move. "No."

"No, what?" Lysandra asks.

"No, Leer-rah."

I squeeze his hand and, beginning to believe there could be something special about my siren blood, say, "Don't be stupid. My blood will probably heal you faster anyway."

"No." His determined voice is only a wheezing whisper.

Lysandra is about to put her wrist back to Draven's mouth, but I glance at her collar. "It's black."

She frowns. "I've exceeded my limit. Draven, I'll go and get others, okay?"

His chin moves a fraction of an inch in agreement. "Sounds good, Ly." He cracks an eyelid open.

She gently settles his head back and scurries off. I lean over him and look at his whisper-thin eyelashes. Slowly, a single eyelid scrapes over the cornea as he opens it all the way.

I wince. "Oh, don't do that. Just close your eyes." I brush my fingers over his hair in a move meant to comfort him and instantly regret it. His locks are sticky and stiff. "You look like you were squeezed out of a bloodkin eel's birthing canal."

He grunts, but I can tell something amuses him by the way the corner of his mouth lifts. "You loookk… ridiculous."

I blink. "You can see? Your eyes work all right?"

He grimaces as he swallows. "The dreesss."

I look down and smooth the billow of my skirts, and ask with a teasing lilt to my tone, "You don't like it?"

His lips work into a frown. "No."

I snort. "Well, you really need to make up your mind."

"I did." He struggles to clear his throat. "Scales, Leer-rah."

I purse my lips, annoyed that we aren't making any progress because he needs more blood *now*. "Look, I'm gonna give you my blood. This is taking too long." I open my mouth wide to bite into my wrist.

Draven twitches and, with a shoulder shimmy meant to propel movement, lobs his contracted and clawed arm in my direction and whacks my knee with his hand. "No!"

"Why can't you drink my blood! I'm bright crimson, Draven! Quit being so stubborn."

"I was wr-wrong 'bout everythin', bit."

I seethe out my nostrils. "Now you're just realizing that?"

"Leer-rah. I'ma gon-na fiix this." His lungs sound as if they're rubbing painfully over his ribs. "'Rick my 'inger wit' my fang."

"What?"

His elbow creaks as he tries to bend his arm.

"What are you doing?" I shriek. "Trying to snap your arm off?"

"I 'eed you to 'rick my d'ang finger, love." His Adam's apple bobs, making him wince.

Not really getting the gist of what he's saying, I work on bending his arm at the elbow and guiding his finger to his mouth, which seems to be where he's trying to get it. He rolls his lips back to bare his fangs, which are barely poking from shriveled gums.

I then understand. *Prick his finger.*

"What's this going to do?" Quickly, I jab his leathery finger to the fang tip before the tendons connected to his elbow snap.

I'm surprised when a drop of blood painstakingly oozes out.

His hand shakes. His finger tremors as he straightens his arms and reaches toward me. I try to help him, but I'm not sure where his bloody finger is headed, but then he lifts it to my throat, my collar.

"Yeah, it's red," I say pathetically.

With a tired hand, he pushes his fingertip against the red leather and lets the digit slide down to the edge and hit my hide. Then his hand drops back to his side.

There's an audible click as if the collar had a lock all along, and the pressure around my throat suddenly loosens. I grab at the leather and pull it away, clutching it in my hands to gape at the regular dull brown of the hide, not hardly able to believe this thing is magical. "Draven? What did you do?"

"Free."

Out of breath, Lysandra tumbles back into the room. She collapses at Draven's other side. "The queen…" she gasps, "thralled all the crimsons. The vampires have drunk from every single one in preparation for battle. There's not a single crimson left in the palace. They drained them completely. They're all dead."

Draven's eyes fly open. "No!" He twists and tries to sit up, but I push him back down, much to his pinched-up face's obvious discontent.

Lysandra gawks at the collar I've discarded. "You took it off! Draven! We have no safety gauge now, and you're going to have to drink from Leira."

Draven thrashes about, rolling back and forth to gain momentum to push to his feet. "No. No. Ly, find me a crimm-sonn!"

“They are dead! No one is left except those who have gone home to recover. We’re it!”

I push Draven in the forehead, and he collapses back. Then I stick my wrist out. “*Stepbrother*, come on. Quit being so stubborn. We need to stop mummy dearest now, don’t we?” I look at Lysandra. “It’s still safe without the collar, right?”

She nods. “Yeah. I’ll stop him if it gets too far.”

Just as a tortured groan erupts from Draven, his body violently contracts.

“His nerves are starting to regenerate,” Lysandra shrieks. “The pain would pass more quickly if he would drink fast and now!”

His body begins forcefully shuddering as if he’s racked with shivers.

“Draven!” I exclaim. “What’s happening?”

Lysandra braces his shoulders as his head flops uselessly to the side. “He’s seizing! The pain is so great, his body can’t compensate. Give him blood now! Now, Leira. We have to push him past this!”

I sink my teeth into my wrist until I taste blood and shove the punctured appendage into Draven’s gaping mouth. He writhes away, making the wretched sound of a mourning whale, a sound of utter heartache and anguish.

“Please, Draven. Please.” I fight to shove my wrist into his mouth, only succeeding in smearing blood across his cheek, because whether he means to or not, he contorts and seizes away from me.

Lysandra tries to help me hold him, to work his lips toward my wrists by gripping his chin, but he’s stubborn to the extreme.

The seizing halts. Draven’s rasping breaths and shallow chest movements are the only sounds and motions.

And mine and Lysandra’s heavy breaths as we work to compose ourselves.

I bite my lip as I look at Lysandra, not sure what else to do. Draven’s still emaciated, has a long way to go until he gains full strength and his body plumps up, but his muscles look as if they are starting to loosen and bend, and maybe the worst of it is past and what little blood he has will heal him slowly.

Rumbling words buzz from Draven’s throat, but I sense the tone, that of resignation. “Lysandra, love…” Our struggle left Draven turned onto his bony hip and shoulder so that he’s speaking with a cheek to the floor and his back to me. He bends his arm as if he’s going to push himself up, which gives me hope that he is stronger. “You better stop me, you understand, yeah?”

She doesn’t have time to respond. I don’t know what’s happening until, with a speed that shocks me, Draven twists in my direction and crunches upright. His eyes are black. His fangs lengthened. His nostrils flaring.

I rear back too late. His fingers with black nails grip my head and neck—

And his hot breath hits my throat for just a second before the sharpest prick has me drawing a pinched breath.

His fangs sink deeply, and I have every sense of their parting tissue and piercing life-giving vessels. I welcome this for Draven’s sake, for all our sakes, so we can stop Serafina, so I can return home—

Because I need Draven. I need his help. His knowledge. His fight. His anger.

Every bit of vengeance soaking through his core.

Together, we will annihilate the queen.

A heady feeling lifts through me as a warm sensation melts up my neck and across my collarbones and down my shoulders and torso until my whole body feels as if I’m floating in a warm current.

My mouth silently forms an O.

“She’s feeling it now,” I barely hear Lysandra mutter.

Much too soon there’s a release of pain and pressure I don’t understand because his lips are still pressed to me, but then I comprehend that his fangs have retracted to allow my blood to pool into his mouth.

Still the feeling of bliss envelops me. I exhale rapturously as a vigorous pull starts on my neck.

This is nothing like when he bit my lip. Nothing like the kiss under the sea when he sucked my bottom lip until it was swollen and mangled.

My hands find Draven’s biceps, and I grip them as they round out beneath my touch. With glorious excitement coursing through me, I run my palms gently over his chest and find it broadening with his shoulders, which I skate my hands over next.

Draven’s body is enlivening. The strength of his hands controlling me, angling my neck so he can drink more deeply, intensifies. He’s swelling while I’m shrinking.

Even though he sucks as if he cannot control himself, as if he does not want to stop, I sense his grimace and a grunt of dismay and a rocking that has started, which shifts me gently but tells me pain courses through him.

I pant shallow breaths, and soon I’m pawing at Draven, at his sticky chest once more, his stiff locks, drawing him closer to me, wishing and wanting him to drink harder, faster, longer, until I am nothing and everything in his arms.

“Draven,” I murmur. “Draven.”

His torturous cries pull his mouth from my throat, but he returns with desperation, always suckling, licking, savoring.

Drops of warm fluid tickle my jaw, my shoulder, everywhere his cheek touches, his eyelashes flutter against.

Tears. These are tears.

His tears.

I whimper because I cannot fully understand his anguish. Why does giving myself to him this way make him cry? Why does my blood do this to him?

His body is warm against me, full of me, powerful, and I relish him so close, so attentive. I whimper with parted lips, trying to tell him I'm not close enough to him. That something is incomplete.

His drinking from me is inadequate.

As if he recognizes my verbal protest, he jerks me into his lap and cocoons my small body in the frame of his.

I inhale expectantly and lift my face to his.

The grunts of pain from his body's renewal have shifted to whimpers of confliction. And satisfaction. His eager draws subside, and he switches to lavishing my throat with his tongue.

I'm holding on to Draven for dear life. I'm afraid to let him go. If I can't continue blinking up at him—and my eyes close—I just know I won't ever see him again.

I won't let that happen.

His lips whisper over my throat, sending dizzying sensations through my stomach, and lift to my jaw. My eyes roll back as he noses along my cheek to my earlobe, but still I am here with him, though my spirit is overwhelmed and weeping with joy.

His fingers laced through my tresses, he wrenches my chin down so our eyes align. With a fleeting understanding, I find them black and filled with moisture.

I do not fear them now.

I try to part my lips to ask what I can't understand, about Draven's sounds and the words he says with his eyes, but unexpectedly for me, he meets my separated lips with his own and draws us together as his palms slip to cradle my face.

With a gasp into his mouth, I understand what we're doing. He's kissing me. And it's sweet. And there's no pain. No biting. No piercing.

My eyes widen more, but when I see that his are closed, I determinedly let mine flutter shut.

If I can feel his lips, I will know I'm not losing him.

He's here with me.

We are together.

My insides are doing a crazy dance, tightening and squirming and tickling—sensations that almost make me laugh. But no, I am far beyond laughing.

I might never laugh again.

Draven has slipped his tongue between my teeth and teases my mouth, and he's moaning with such a happy hum into me that I feel it in my core.

He's happy?

I am making him happy.

I am dwelling so much on this that I miss when he first speaks between greedy, needy kisses.

Then I catch his words, and my belly sinks.

"Why, Leira, why did you let me drink from you?" he asks as he lovingly braces my face and looks with anguished eyes into mine before returning for more kisses.

I'm selfish and can't respond. I only know I want more of his taste, his salty, coppery, lips on mine. They've plumped up, whole once more from his gorging—and puffy from our kisses.

He tears away with a gasp. "This isn't real, love." He kisses me quickly. Once. Twice. "I am still locked by your thrall." A third time. "And my venom makes you think you want this, but remember, love, you *hate* me." He nuzzles my cheek, but I find his lips and coax more tender presses from them. "I didn't want to make you feel this," he says as he twists his lips away.

"Don't be silly. I feel wonderful. Relaxed. Happy. How could I possibly hate you?" I turn his face back and tease his upper lip playfully with my mouth. He doesn't fight me, which makes a silly giggle slip from me. "And I know you aren't exactly disappointed, are you, my prince?"

With a growl, he shifts me on his lap and grips my cheeks hard enough to stop any forward advances on my part. Forehead to forehead, we freeze. Draven is swallowing and licking his lips and his next words cut me as they finally sink in. "None of our feelings are real, *stepsister*."

I squeeze my eyes shut and furiously shake my head. "My nexus scale is gone. You are not feeling my thrall."

"I am, bit. It never left me. I know it." He whacks on his chest. "I feel it in here." He taps his skull. "And in here."

Lysandra clears her throat. "Prince Draven, maybe you are actually feeling something else."

He huffs and gnaws his lip as he shakes his head. "I won't believe it… I can't." He looks at his crimson. "Lysandra…?" As Draven shifts his eyes back to mine, his fleshy thumb skims hauntingly over my puffy lips as if it has a mind of its own. "But she's feeling the venom, yeah, Lysandra? You know she is. *You* feel it every time."

Unbearable sorrow sinks through me. "This can't be from venom," I mouth.

Draven's gaze is unfocused on my lips. He's too lost in thought to validate my unspoken statement.

My feelings cannot be from venom.

What feelings? What feelings does he suppose I have for him? How can he be so presumptuous?

I hate Draven.

I do.

My lips all over his spoke a different story though.

I scoff, even as Draven still fiddles with my lower lip.

Lysandra scoots closer. They have no idea of my returning repulsion.

I do not like Draven.

"Yeah, I know it," Lysandra says, "but Draven, my dearest friend, my prince." She puts her palm on his chest. "Maybe you can be brave and admit what you refuse to believe."

I furrow my brow as I stare into Draven's sorrow-filled eyes. I don't recall what they were debating. "I don't understand. What's she talking about?"

He drops his hand from my lip and leans back, creating distance between us. "Lysandra thinks I love you, bit."

Chapter 20
Draven

Her head rolls back with a laugh. “That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard, Draven! You, in love with me? Ha! Yeah right. Really funny.”

I groan, shift her off my lap, and scoot back. “See, Lysandra? The venom. She absolutely freakin’ hates my undead guts.”

Lysandra slides closer and grabs Leira’s wrist to check her pulse and then pries one of her eyelids open wide. “Are you feeling okay? Woozy? Weak? Draven took a lot of blood, but you don’t look too pale and your pulse is stable.”

Leira hisses and shoves to her feet at the same time I do.

We give each other a scathing glare.

Lysandra stands. “Oh, for the love of—! Can you two just give it a rest?”

I saunter toward the exit after grabbing my daylight ring from a table near the wall. While shoving it onto my finger, I mumble, “In love with her? Absolute rubbish.” I yank my black collared shirt on.

That kiss did nothing more than get my knickers in a twist, and I can solve this setback with anyone other than my sister!

At the entrance, when Lysandra and Leira don’t follow right away, I whirl toward them. “Well, come on! We don’t have all day. Let’s go find that lousy queen.” I continue to mutter under my breath as I swagger out the door. “Killed all my crimsons. How dare she! *My* crimsons! I really liked some of those humans.” Thank the abyss Lysandra was spared. Louder, I shout, “I’m gonna kill her myself!”

I turn to find Leira wobbling along with Lysandra’s help, and swear. She’s completely spent, thanks to me. I hurry back over to them. “Oi, Leira. I’m sorry.”

She halfheartedly waves her hand at me. “Let’s forget about it, okay? I do not want to think about your mouth on my throat.”

“Or on your lips, I gather.”

She narrows her eyes, staking me with mental daggers.

I bristle but ignore her. “You aren’t in a fit state to face Serafina, that’s for sure.” I bend to scoop her up, but she shoves me away.

“I can walk! I don’t need your help.”

“Maybe if you took off the twenty-pound dress, yeah, love?” I eye Leira up and down. The dress is atrocious, and streaked with my blood, but the purple color complements Leira’s finer features—her eyes, her hair, her scales.

I swallow.

Geez, her scales. I huff out a breath. I really like her scales, but the dress hides ninety-nine percent of them.

All but the swirl along her temple.

“How about we get Leira back to her room to rest, and I’ll fetch her food and water,” Lysandra suggests. “It’ll help.”

“Maybe you can find another vampire to give her some blood,” I say. “Someone who’s not loyal to Serafina.”

“Yeah. That’s an idea. They’ve all been thralled, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Just be subtle about it.” I rest my palm on Lysandra’s wrist and give her a meaningful gaze. She’s been with me through a lot, and even though I know she’s capable, I can’t help adding, “And careful. I don’t want anyone draining you, Ly.”

She smiles up at me. “I know. And don’t worry. I know my way stealthily around the palace.” She winks before disappearing into the dark hallway beyond the grim ceremonial chamber.

The fact that no one came for me after the vessel was collected means Serafina’s done with me. I’m useless to her, which means she won’t think twice about getting rid of me.

I tell Leira this, and add, “We’re gonna have to be wary.”

She nods, her eyes closing, and then the next second, her head’s rolling back as her legs give out.

I let some not so savory words slip as I catch her, ’cause keeping her from bashing her head on the hard stone floor isn’t easy. I can barely find the back of her knees under all this fabric, and once I have her settled against my chest, the skirts puff up into my face so that I have to spit them away.

I grumble as I take the nethermost paths back to our chambers. Not a vamp or demon in sight. Serafina must have them all bending to her will somewhere other than the palace hallways.

Leira’s humming against my shoulder, lost in a daydream, a hand of hers resting lightly on my neck. Every few steps, Leira tickles the base of my hairline. I’m covered in gooseflesh by the time I kick her bedroom door open.

“Leira, love, we’re back.” I stand in the middle of the room, debating whether to dump her thoughtlessly onto her bed.

A Draven not in love with Leira would.

I flinch, getting ready to toss her.

For some reason, I can’t.

I snarl. Curse it all!

Leira tries to shift in my sticky arms. I'm still covered in gore, and the more Leira's pressed to me, the more transfers to her.

Gaw, her lips, her throat are covered in my blood.

I can't leave her like this. "Love, I gotta get you cleaned up because if you could see yourself, you would murder me."

"I'd murder you anyway," she mumbles.

"Fair enough." I pause as I figure this out. "Lysandra's gonna be back in a minute, I swear, but I'm gonna get you situated in the meantime." I carry her to the washroom. "Can you stand for me?"

She flops a hand around. "Yeah. Yeah. I'm fine, Prince Draven-poo."

I roll my eyes. "Somehow I don't believe you." But I ease her down and prop her so she's pressing into the vanity with her palms. "Hold right there." I dart over and start the water into her tub. I see the big container of salt Lysandra must have gotten her and dump a bunch into the water. Sirens need a lot of salt water to hydrate their skin whether they are two-legged or fishie tailed.

I come back over to Leira. She's gazing into the mirror, making faces with her bloodstained lips. "You took my collar off," she whispers.

"I did. Now let's get this gown off. A siren should be a siren, am I right? Scales and all."

She nods.

Gentler than I intend—I'm kicking myself for it—I sweep her tangled locks off her back and over her shoulders. I don't see any buttons on the gown. "How did you get this gown on?"

"Over my head."

"Uh-huh. Well, let's try something different here. You won't be needing the gown anyway." I grip the garment at the neckline with both hands and pull.

A satisfying rip meets my hearing, and I keep tearing the material down her back, right along her spine. As I do, the path of her shimmering scales reveals itself to me a little at a time.

So slowly. So teasingly.

I mentally groan.

Sirens have their colors, I'm figuring out, and Leira's is that deep dark purple. Like ink. Like tattoos alluringly covering her body. They match her eyes, her hair.

I am most definitely partial to her particular shade.

Leira exhales slowly, and her tiny body deflates inside her gown as the fabric loosens. She's not wearing constricting undergarments, but the gown itself is enough to suffocate her and dry out her skin.

Curse Serafina for making Leira cover herself.

Leira's still pressing against the vanity, but her eyes have closed and her head's lolling side to side. As I spread the opening of her gown farther, I see all the muscles under those scales ripple with her neck movement.

A serious ache sinks into my lower belly.

Leira's not making a protest so far, so I slip my palms up under the shoulder of her gown and glide the fabric from her collarbones and down her biceps, my palms skimming over the strong muscles of her upper arms.

Leira's mouth parts, and she draws a seductive breath.

Oh, now, love. Don't do that.

I'm melting and pooling on the floor like goo.

No. I'm gonna pretend her reaction is from the weight of the dress coming away.

We've both decided we have a vast dislike for one another. So there. There's nothing else for it.

The dress has dropped to just above her siren swells and hangs at her elbows. With a strangled inhale, I slide my hands to her back, and slip them under the gown, along her ribcage and across her belly.

Draven, what are you doing?

I'm not doing a thing, you git!

My palms brush over her hips, and Leira whimpers. I've moved closer to her, my bare, bloody chest just a fraction away from her scales. Her head has drooped, as if she's tired.

As if she's actually relaxed for the first time in my presence.

My hands twitch. An innate feral urge insists I draw her against me, to reach around and figure out the mystery of her camouflaging scales.

Leira giggles, throwing my inclination. "You need a bath more than I do." Her eyes have lifted to mine in the mirror.

My palms freeze over her abdomen. "Do I, little bit?" I have to shift my focus from her gaze, so my lips move suddenly to her neck where her collar used to be.

Not smart, Draven. Bad move.

A glance up shows me her nod as she bites her lip.

"Don't do that, Leira," I whisper into her ear, my voice pleading, broken, wanting.

“Do what?” Her words are breathy.

My insides are twisted up. This beauty has me hooked. “Bite your lip like that, love.” I nuzzle her neck as if I’m under her bloomin’ spell.

I am under her spell, dang it. She has me lost again, no siren song needed.

On that unwanted tone, I yank my hands out and shove the rest of her gown down. Down to her hips and then past until it puddles around her ankles.

I can hardly breathe now that I’m looking at her, really looking at her and her scales for the first time.

She’s the most haunting, deadly thing I have ever seen, and she’s not even wearing her fins.

Leira blinks sheepishly at me through the mirror, and I can’t figure out if she’s still just knackered or feeling the same heat I am or if she doesn’t care a lick what happens to her in her weakened state.

Enough of this.

I swing her up and whisk her over to the tub, then step right into the agitating water and sink up to my knees and then lie back until my shoulders are under, with her in my arms.

The water immediately grows cloudy from all our filth, but fresh water tumbling in helps to clear it.

Leira floats back against my chest, her legs stretching out, her hair surfacing and tickling my skin where it brushes.

Oh demons and hellfire. “I know you don’t like me, princess, but are you starting to trust me?” My throat is so thick with wanting I can barely squeak my words out without sounding like a dolt. When she doesn’t respond right away, I say, “’Cause we don’t have to like each other to trust each other, right?”

To fall in love with her.

Shut it, Draven!

Leira’s arms float up and reach around to toy with my neck and skim my jaw, pushing her tiny siren swells up and out of the water.

I whimper and shut my eyes, but my stupid, rebellious palms skate over the trail of scales on her tight abs. “You’re sending me all these signals, and I don’t think you have the faintest idea what you’re doing, yeah? ’Cause you’re so used to the siren thrall doin’ it for you.”

Her legs tangle with mine, and I suddenly wish I didn’t have my tattered pants clinging to my skin.

We should be flesh against flesh. Skin to skin.

Scales to skin.

With frustration, I sink under the water, dunking my grimy head and making the bathwater even darker. Leira loses the hard cushion of my chest, and scrambles to twist and stay above water. I watch through the murky water as she turns and comes to rest belly to belly with me, dipping her face so she hovers right above mine.

Here, now, she looks so much like herself. If I didn’t feel her legs grappling with mine, I would think she was a siren.

We blink underwater at each other, slowly letting the bubbles rise from our mouths. Her palms grip my biceps to keep herself from floating away, but still, she steadily sways as if in a current, ever looking down at me, winding her watery image forever into my dreams.

Until our breaths are gone.

Then, as one, we surface, gasping hungry lungfuls of air.

I don’t know what to say to her, and I can’t fathom what she’s possibly thinking.

“You hate me, bit,” I whisper as if to be sure, as if I’m reminding her.

“But I’ll trust you,” she says, her lips barely above the water’s surface.

I lean forward in the water, meeting her gaze, so tempted to press my lips to hers, if only to be sure I’m not insane. “I’m gonna be okay with that.”

Leira’s stomach rumbles, and with panic gripping me, suddenly I’m rearing back and bolting upright from the tub.

“Lysandra! She’s not back yet. She’s been gone much too long.” With red, bloody water streaming off my torso, I climb out of the tub, and not willing to leave Leira in the tub in her weakened state—not when she could drown again—I stoop and draw her upright.

For a moment, we teeter off balance, pressed chest to chest, but then I pivot Leira from the tub and set her on her own two feet. “We gotta go, bit. Something’s not right. I thought Ly would be back by now.” I swear as I find a towel and toss it to Leira. The one I grab for myself becomes quickly coated in the remains of my blood. “I should have gone with her, or we should have stayed together. Blast it!”

I throw the soiled towel to the floor. Leira halfheartedly blots at her skin. I reckon she would rather stay damp like a syartic demon.

Like the syartic demon whose particular secretions are most potent and energizing.

Brilliant.

I snap my fingers. “I have vitality elixir in my room.” Before she can answer, and not wanting to leave her longer than necessary, I blur from the bath and into my room, grab the elixir stashed behind a frame, and blur back. I hold the vial out to

her. “Drink it all, love.” My hand flicks out, and I grab her wrist to steady her when the disturbance of my blowing in throws her off balance. “I was saving it for a rainy day, and I think this might be it.”

She tilts her head and squints at the green liquid. “What’s in it?”

“Some powders and extracts from various plants and demons. I won’t tell you more or you won’t drink it, but I swear it will do you good.” I raise my brows. “Trust, right?”

“Okay.” She takes the vial. “If it will help me kick my mother back to the abyss, I’ll drink it.”

She guzzles the contents down, and when she’s done, she sticks her tongue out and makes a face. “That is vile.”

“Yeah, it is.” I smirk. “We gotta find Ly now, okay? You feelin’ up to it?”

With a cute little shudder that makes her scales undulate in the light, she shakes her body out from her head to her toes. “Yep, let’s go.”

Chapter 21
Draven

It doesn't take us long to realize Lysandra is nowhere we want her to be. And dawn is upon us, so queenie should be holding court right about now.

A stealthy glance into the throne room, to the dais, shows Lysandra held around the throat by a vampire minion. She's limp and complaisant, probably banking on me saving her.

I'm not so sure I can, but I won't let that stop me from trying.

"Bloody hell," I whisper to Leira. "This is in no way good."

"How are we going to save her?" Little stepsister is amped. She's gripping my forearm with both hands as she vibrates with energy beside me.

She's still dripping water from her hair. Still looking like a wave-tumbled siren. The salty notes of her skin and in her hair are in fact grounding me. I feel steady. Good.

Not in love.

Nope. I gotta get to Ly. Can't let anything happen to her.

"I think we're gonna have to grovel, bit. We're no match for her queenliness."

And pretending I'm the sun to this dismal joint, I stride into the throne room with Leira bouncing at my side.

Queen Serafina welcomes us with a snide look. The room's packed full of nasties all thralled to her wishes, who we have to shove past to even reach her gallant presence.

Serafina's lounging in her scales-and-tail in her saltwater pool.

"Draven." She simpers at me. "I'm so glad you could make it—" She cuts herself off. "Where's Leira's collar? Her dress?"

"Oh." I stiffen back. "Yeah, there were some issues with that, Your Majesty. Thought she should take a break for a spell, yeah?"

Leira stands confidently beside me, but a single palm curls around the wrist at my side, her grip tightening on me the more Serafina scrutinizes her.

The queen arches her brows. "Mmmh." Then she waves to Lysandra on the dais. "We saved her just for you, dearest Draven, anticipating your need for refreshment."

Refreshment. She has to be kidding. She left me with no intention of rehydrating my dried out hide.

The queen's still rambling. "The rest of my loyal followers have nourished themselves, and you can see they are ready for our descent, but now I see you don't need Lysandra at all, do you, Draven?"

Feeling anxious, I step forward, which makes Leira release me, and lift a hand. "No! I need her! She's my crimson. I'll take her. No one else is to touch her!"

Serafina's floppy fins lightly splash the water like an agitated kitty flicking its tail. "Go ahead. We'll wait while you sup. Take her on the dais. We have just a few final preparations before nightfall when we are to assemble on the beach."

I grab Leira's hand and move a single pace toward Ly.

"Leira stays here, beside me." Serafina's voice lifts with her command. "Come, Leira. Come into the water with your mommy and hydrate your scales."

Leira's eyes are round as she starts moving hesitantly toward the queen, but I turn Leira back. With a steady look into her eyes, I hold her, trying to get her to understand.

Serafina wants us separated.

My nostrils flare as I fight with myself. I could compel Leira right now, with unspoken words to obey my wishes, but one command would pull her back under my cloud.

I don't wanna have to do that again, not after I released her, not when I'm sure her feelings are her own, so I just mouth, "Don't do anything stupid."

Like make a grab for your nexus scale, I don't say.

Serafina chuckles.

Leira's pert nose wrinkles, and she shakes her head just a hair to the left before returning to center.

No. My insides sink into the floor. Come on, love!

She's amped. She's not gonna listen a lick. She's going for it.

"Draven, Lysandra waits!" Serafina flicks her wrist, and the vamp minion tightens his grip on Ly.

I blur toward her quickly, my fangs extended, my vamp powers heightened. She's way beyond black as pale as she is, as if someone had a taste before I got here, but I only have to take a little. My vamp compulsion can command her to faint, to sink into a deathlike state enough to fool Serafina.

I'm quick enough to see the whites in Ly's terror-filled eyes, the dilation of her pupils, the sharp inhale of breath.

The minion lifts his mitts to her noggin.

"No!" I shout, ready to tear his arms off.

Faster than I can reach her, he snaps her neck.

His hands pull away as he smirks, and Lysandra's limp body tumbles into my arms.

"No, Ly. No!" I'm shattered. Absolutely wrecked.

But I use this. After gingerly laying her on the floor, I jump up and pound the vamp in the face.

He flies back against the throne and the scrying bowl; the whole bit tumbles with him, sending water everywhere.

I dive over the ornamented seat and wail on him, pounding into his face with no mercy until he's gurgling blood and I'm splattered with it.

"Draven!"

Serafina's chilling shout makes me twist off the vampire. Halfway to my feet, crouched with a knee up, I freeze.

Leira's grasping at her throat while Serafina holds her at arm's length with her magic. Again. When will bit learn?

Serafina's chest is bloody and scratched, but the cuts seal before my eyes.

The blood dripping from Leira's talons tells me she had her go while I was distracted.

And no surprise to me, she failed.

But I am surprised at the amount of gore she had time to unearth. Good for her.

Stalling for time, for brilliant inspiration to get Leira and me out of this mess, I glance down at Lysandra's broken body at my feet. Ly, why? The tears brim in my eyes as I swallow back my rage.

Serafina has us.

And I'm useless. Powerless. There's not a single thing a pathetic vampire prince can do against a siren with a powerful nexus scale, her magics, and her pile of thralled minions.

Magics.

I'm supposed to have magic. A single trace of blood magic that comes through my lineage. I've never managed to do much but slow my own heartbeat.

Travers and Mavis haven't ever been able to get my mojo to work as an extension of myself, no matter what tutelage they have pushed me through.

In desperation, I bow my head. I picture Serafina's vile polluted siren blood pulsating through her coldhearted frame. It's impure. Tainted by the blood of hundreds of vampires. By my own blood.

I've made her powerful. My strength. My heightened senses. My healing.

She's taken everything from me.

She won't take my Leira.

Boil, I command. Scald the wicked queen beastie. Tear her flesh apart from the inside out.

Her blood cells start to jump.

Serafina releases a cackling laugh that makes me jerk my head up. "Oh, Draven. What are you doing?"

"Saving my sister from your ugly claws." I close my eyes to focus.

Serafina laughs harsher, louder. "So you've figured it out, have you?"

My eyes snap open. "Figured what out, you nasty piece of work?"

"Your *sister*," Serafina purrs. "King Nereus didn't leave me with the parting gift of a seventh daughter before he exiled me. King Asmodear came to me before I returned to Lunaris. He bedded me, fooled me into thinking he loved me. But I learned his tricks. Finally understood the power of compulsion that played with my mind."

Leira kicks her feet, shrieking past the tightening around her throat.

My focus is lost. "What are you getting at, old hag!"

"I returned to my husband only to find out I was carrying your father's bastard child. I thought I could fool Nereus into believing the child was his, but his disgust is what sent me to land once more."

I laugh now, disbelieving, incredulously, as I stand. "Lies, Serafina. All lies."

She jerks Leira in my direction. "You don't see the resemblance? I said she had her father's ruddy complexion and, I might add, your brazen rashness."

"She is a siren through and through, Serafina." I take a step and push my blood magic and compulsion at her. Bend to me while boiling to death! "There isn't a human thing about her. You can't fool me. I'm not gullible like my father, falling for the first set of tempting scales I meet." I saunter toward her fishiness while commanding my power.

Leira gives up prying at her throat and swings out with her talons toward her mummy dearest. She's too far away to cause any damage, but I'm proud of her just the same.

"Draven, do you know what your efforts feel like?" Serafina asks. "Little bubbles under my skin. They tickle." She laughs.

"Shut up, witch!" Scourge her! I throw compounded compulsion at her. "Let Leira go, Serafina. You will release her."

"Draven, you do know what time of day it is?"

I ignore her and concentrate.

"I figured out another nexus scale power," she yammers. "I believe Tiberius went missing just before Leira came to us. I've always admired his ability to throw shade. He was taken to the harvest, was he not?"

Sweat drips down my forehead. My arms have lifted and I'm pushing at Serafina with all my might.

She finally gasps and drops Leira with a splash into her pool, but I don't have time to marvel. Serafina's flipping back, stirring up the water like a hurricane while Leira grapples to the surface. Then, queen nasty floats up with a fountain of water and her arms thrown over her head.

The shadows in the room tear from the floor, the walls, as Serafina scoops them up and, one after the other, slams them into me.

I'm able to push against the first few, but as the onslaught is replenished by shadows that never disappear under the encroaching sun, I finally buckle and am bowled back.

My head cracks against the edge of the dais, and as blood pools around me, I gaze up at the high ceiling.

Freakin' sea witch! I can't afford to lose Leira's precious blood.

Ignoring the spinning in my noggin', I twist up and throw myself onto the closest spectator.

A rekdohme demon. His green blood burns like acid on the way down, but it'll do in a pinch.

"Draven!"

I wretch my mouth off the rekdohme demon and spin to find a frantic Leira in a bubble of water hovering above the queen's pool. I swipe the green blood from my lips as I work to control my heaving chest and gauge this new situation.

Serafina pops out of the water, seamlessly shifting to her two legs. How, when Leira's shift caused such pain and nauseating cracking?

"Draven, I've decided that once I've had my little visit to Lunaris, I'm going to return to Soundless Shores. Yes." She presses her palms over her pulsating nexus scale. "I can't bear to let this place go. So many fond memories."

I lean in, my body tense with fight as I shout my words. "Drown in the abyss, witch!"

"You would like that, wouldn't you?" She smiles up at Leira as the bubble shifts and she tumbles inside. "So here's what I've decided. You and Leira are exiled from both kingdoms. I'm preemptively making that ruling in anticipation of conquering Lunaris."

I scoff. "You're insane."

"Maybe." The next words fall bluntly from her mouth. "And your foster parents' lives are forfeit."

"No, you can't."

Her expression shifts to boredom. "I shall be generous. I will release you to them for one day. You may say goodbye. I'm not heartless, after all. Then you may run off to another kingdom, I don't care where to. Lord Oberon Duskmir likes taking in cast offs."

I narrow my eyes. "And Leira?"

"Oh, I think pining over your sister will be enough misery for the both of you. An eternity of forbidden love for each other."

I growl. "Pining? Who's pining, you sorry sack of bones?"

"I'm not blind, Draven. Your affections for your sister are endearing."

"You're delusional, and she's not my sister."

"You say that now, but ask Travers and Mavis. They know the truth."

"Leave my foster parents out of this."

"I did not involve them, Draven. Come now. Surely you can see I am being more than generous. I've allowed them to live this long, and I'm permitting your visit." She waves a hand. "Take them from my sight. I'm tired of these theatrics."

As her minions grab my arms and Leira's bubble pops and she plops once more into the pool, I holler. "Serafina, mark my words. You're going down." I struggle as they drag me from the throne room. Leira's not far behind with her own beasties escorting her out. "You'll pay. I'll carve your nexus scale out myself and then shove it down your throat!"

"Mmmh," the queen hums. "Draven, one last thing. I shall let your parents both live long enough for you to ask them yourselves, and then my reapers shall descend and that will be the end of secrets. You have until nightfall."

With those farewell sentiments, I throw myself into the first captor, knocking him to the floor, and then punch the second right in his scaled face. "I'll take things from here," I snarl. With a minute opening, I grab Leira from her lot and drag her out the door.

I pull her with haste toward the front of the palace, just catching Serafina's final howl. "Reapers! Go! Now!" Her command spills a dozen shadow wraiths out into the courtyard just behind little bit and me.

I let the swears fly as I start running. Leira can barely keep up as I drag her along.

"Draven, where are we going?" she yells as the shadow wraiths reach the stables and mount their undead horses. "What do we do now?"

"We gotta hurry, love!" I stick two fingers into my mouth and blow a shrill whistle that cuts through the tumult. "It's a

race. Serafina knows it will take an entire day to reach Castleroch where my foster parents live, and shadow wraiths are wicked fast. I'm not sure we can beat them. My foster parents are likely toast."

Chapter 22
Leira

"Shadow wraiths?" I scurry after Draven, still feeling the energy burst from the elixir, but even so, he's near impossible to keep up with.

"A grim ghostie that doesn't just kill," Draven spits. "It harvests souls."

I draw a sharp breath. I do not like the sound of that.

A monstrous silver and black striped cat bounds into the courtyard and skids to a halt right in front of Draven. The beast's shoulders come to his head.

"What in the name of the abyss is that!" I shriek as I barrel into Draven's back.

The massive kitty crouches as he purrs and nuzzles Draven's midsection. "A felinor. Name's Regalith." Draven brushes his palm over the creature's shoulder before grabbing me by the waist and tossing me up between its shoulder blades. Draven vaults himself up behind me. "It's gonna be a hellish ride."

Before Regalith can get past a few pacing paws, another shrill whistle pierces the yard. Draven's head snaps up.

The vamp guard I've run into, the one dressed in black, sprints up. "Draven!" She lifts her arm and chucks something in our direction. I duck just as Draven's hand shoots out and catches whatever she tossed.

A blade in a harness.

"If I get out of this alive, Kaela, I owe you one!" Draven shouts as he straps the blade between his shoulder blades.

I'm blinking back astonishment. Mostly because people do care about this prince. Lysandra's unforgettable loyalty that got her killed and now this vamp guard who is somehow not under the queen's command.

Draven kicks his heels into Regalith's sides. "Let's go, mate." He presses his back to me and grips the beast's furry hide on either side of me. "We ride fast, Leira. Hold on."

I scarcely have time to find a grip between Draven's when the beast bounds off with a hiss after the last shadow wraith, who gallops out of the stable way ahead of us.

He's quickly lost from our sight.

"They already have a head start," Draven growls.

I'm bouncing all over the place, but soon I find a rhythm to rock with Regalith's bounds. Draven keeps me secure within the cage of his arms, so I don't necessarily worry about falling. "What's the blade for?"

The wide trail from the palace quickly forks and turns into a narrow cart trail.

"A shadowbane blade. The only thing that can take out a shadow wraith. Gonna work on these ghosties one at a time 'cause there's no way I can take twelve at once when we get to Castleroch."

Soon we move into the cover of sparse trees. I've never in my life seen leafy trees this close, not the ones that shed leaves with the seasons.

My sisters have. When the rain freezes and falls from the sky as wispy white stuff.

Draven points ahead, and whenever the galloping horse breaks out from under the day's shadows, I can just make out a wraith. Draven pats Regalith on the right shoulder. "There he is, boy."

Regalith veers toward the shadow wraith, and I roll into Draven's arm.

"Is he your pet?" I scream into the wind.

"Good friend," Draven rumbles into my ear. He's tucked tight to me. "Closer, Rega! Closer." Draven pushes into my hips with his palms as if checking how secure I am. "You gotta stay on. And stay low. I might be able to slice into this one, but I might have to jump rides, yeah?"

I press my belly into Regalith's thick fur, really feeling the pounding of his paws on the forest floor. "Okay."

Regalith sideswipes the horse and rider, jostling me and making me scream.

"Rega!" Draven shouts, his arm extended for the strike. "Hold steady! I know you like to play, but I'm tryna gut these uglies!"

The wraith pulls a long, thin sword from his scabbard just as we're moving into a narrow pass that pushes the wraith onto a higher trail. He takes a reckless swipe in our direction.

Draven swears as he cowers over me. "Vault, Rega!"

The giant kitty bounds off the stone cliff beside us, pushing us above the wraith. Draven drops with his blade posed for a downward strike and cuts the shadow wraith from shoulder to ribs before landing on the back of the horse.

Regalith bounds ahead of the rider but doesn't lose pace. I'm trying to keep the contents in my stomach and out of kitty's fur.

With the strike, the creature releases a mournful howl as black smoke escapes into the air. I can hardly turn my head to see Draven and can't tell if he effectively dispatched the wraith, when something drops behind me and makes me shriek.

"It's just me, love!" Draven gasps as his arms cage me. "I got him. One down."

I nod. “Does Regalith know where we’re going?”

“Yeah, and he knows the fastest route too. We just gotta hold on and stay sharp for more of those ghosties.”

“Right. So simple.” I wish I had a blade and could help. I don’t want Draven to think I’m useless without my siren song. I can wield a trident. A harpoon. A spear.

“I can help. I just need a weapon.”

“This is all we got, love.” He sheathes the blade and tucks against me. Sweat from his brow brushes my cheek, but with all this rush of air drying out my hide, I welcome the subtle trace of salt.

We bound along for a while, and my heart tightens as I realize we are moving so far from shore. Heavy into the forest.

Not a saltwater pool in sight.

“I’m drying out,” I murmur.

Draven stiffens. “What happens if you get too dry?”

“My hide will crack and bleed, I think. I’ve never let it get that far.”

“Your hide?”

Not getting his tone, I furrow my brow. “Yeah.”

Draven dares to untangle his hand from his fierce grip on Regalith and folds it over my midsection. I don’t miss the way his warm fingers splay around my side and send shivers up my spine. “Your thick, stubborn hide? Hmm?”

I shoulder him.

“That’s why it was so hard for me to bite into,” he says.

“What?”

“When I bit your neck. I noticed a difference. A lot tougher than your pliant lips.”

I feel a blush of heat spread across my cheeks. “We’re just thick skinned.”

“Yeah. I get that now.”

“Draven.” I can’t help the whine slipping into my voice. “I’m going to need water.”

“Hold out for as long as you can, yeah, love? We’re not gonna make it if we have to stop more than once.”

I swallow. “I understand. I’m not gonna let Travers and Mavis get hurt.”

“That means the world to me, Leira.” He bows his face into the crook of my neck and murmurs, “Really. Thank you.”

Over the course of the morning, we overtake two more shadow wraiths and dispatch them. Draven has the luck of staying seated on Regalith.

The sun is high overhead.

Midday, and we haven’t stopped. Regalith paces himself, but he’s tiring.

“We gotta stop,” I say. “Regalith can’t go at this pace forever.”

Draven inhales steadily, as if he’s battling with himself. “I know it.” He pats Regalith on the shoulder. “Let’s stop, yeah?”

The kitty slows to a welcome trot and then abruptly stops. His hindquarters sink so suddenly Draven and I slide down until we tumble into a heap.

“Oof.” Draven lets his head fall back.

“Ugh,” I growl into his chest where I face-planted.

“Take ten, yeah?” Draven says to the sky, making his chest rumble against my face.

Regalith abruptly curls up and goes to sleep.

I roll off Draven and quirk my brow.

“He’ll recover faster by napping than by eating or drinking.” Draven sits up and pulls his knees to his chest as he eyes me.

I’m carefully scratching my dry skin. Red, raw patches seem to have sprouted everywhere my scales aren’t.

“Let’s do something about your hide,” Draven tilts his head as if listening. “There’s a stream close. Come on.”

Fresh water will have to do.

While Draven and I wade knee deep into the stream, I really have a chance to look at our state. I’m in nothing but my scales. Draven’s once again in only tattered, bloodstained pants and his sorry-looking shirt. We don’t have leather on our feet. He at least has his blade.

Draven splashes his chest and arms with water. The stream’s not deep, but I sink below the surface and let the chilly water roll over me.

It’s not enough. I surface and, with a reluctant sigh, push my grumpy bottom lip out.

Draven sees my face. “You need salt. Blood is salty. You’re gonna have to drink from me. Nourish you from the inside out.”

I make a disgruntled face and wave my hands dismissively. “Oh, no. I don’t want to do that again.”

Draven wades closer and sticks his arm out. “Yeah, you have to, bit. That elixir looks as if it’s wearing off, and my blood will heal all your itchies, and give you strength.”

“You need it!” I surge out of the water and immediately lose my balance and topple into Draven.

“Your blood has assimilated with my body by now, and I’m not in danger of desiccating anytime soon. So it can work its vampy mojo. You’ll only need a little to tide you over.” He looks at the sky. “We gotta do this now ’cause we gotta move.”

I sigh as I wade back to the bank. “Okay,” I grouse.

He follows me with his arm extended. “You wanna bite me, love? Or should I?”

Snarling, I whirl on him and grab his arm. I have it lifted to my mouth so quickly I don’t even think twice before sinking my pointed teeth into his skin.

Oh.

His blood reaches my mouth, my tongue. The coppery taste is off-putting, but I immediately begin salivating for the salt in his veins, so I can’t help my vigorous, and somewhat embarrassing sucks.

Draven draws a sharp breath and drops to his knees. I need to go with him or lose my meal. His free hand finds the leafy ground, and he braces himself while holding his sustenance-giving arm out to me.

Soft whispering curses glide past his lips, and soon, he’s rounding in on himself, curling his back while clenching his stomach tight. “Not in love with my sister,” he murmurs. “Not in love with my sister.”

My mouth tears away, and I gape at him. “Are you telling yourself you’re not in love with me?” I sheepishly lick the blood from my lips, surprised to find I feel remarkably better.

“I’m not in love with you. You’re not my sister.” His gored covered arm drops to the ground, and for a steady breath, he’s staring into the leaves and grasses.

“Why should it bother you if I am?” I lean forward and look under his down-turned chin to find his gaze. “I mean, do you really believe the Sea Witch?”

He’s panting as if he’s been the one sprinting through the forest. “I refuse to believe her.”

I settle back on my heels and cross my arms over my chest. “Because you are in love with me.” My tone is skeptical.

“I’m not!” Draven pushes to his feet.

He’s in love with me. Yep.

I roll my eyes. How am I going to handle this? He could be my brother.

Brother.

I haven’t given this enough thought. Half-brother, but still, that’s a mite closer than a stepbrother.

Neither matters to me.

I do not like Draven.

I don’t wish him dead anymore, but I’m not picking an Ocean’s Embrace posy for him.

Draven stalks toward Regalith, licking the wounds in his arm as he goes, his head wagging back and forth as if he hates himself for every bit of everything.

His feelings for me. The fact he had to “feed” me. The fact he’s dragging me along.

The fact that he might not get to his parents in time.

Dang it! I hurry after Draven, feeling awful.

“Regalith, mate. I’m really sorry.” Draven pushes up against the cat and presses his face into his belly fur. For a moment I think he’s weeping, or maybe he’s just breathing funny. Then he mutters, “We gotta move.” He presses away as Regalith stirs, but then swipes at his eyes and cheeks.

Well, okay.

Ouch. My insides are all kinds of knotted up, like kelp tumbled about after a hurricane.

After Mr. Gigantor Kitty stretches, Draven sweeps up onto the cat and holds his hand out to me.

His eyes are red.

My eyes widen, but then stone-faced, I ignore the clawing emotions cutting me deeply and stick my hand out.

Draven’s hand wraps solidly around mine. Warm. Strong.

Confident.

I allow him to pull me up, and once I’m situated in Draven’s arms, Regalith bounds off into the forest as if he was never tired to begin with.

Chapter 23
Draven

"Seven more ghosties left!" I holler into Leira's ear as we scamper with quick kitty bounds up to the village.

Our odds are about as favorable as a picnic in a cemetery.

We're racing the sun as well as the shadow wraiths. I can barely see the vamp-toasting orb above the tree line. When the sun drops below the horizon, the shadow wraiths will amp up their strength—meaning double the trouble, double the fun.

Leira's all weak and bobbing against me, trying to keep her head up and her purpose honed. She keeps jerking against me and saying, "I'm ready. I'm ready."

Right determined, she is.

"Hey, hold tight, little bit." I've got this weird urge to protect her, no longer sure whose fault our mess is anymore, so I'm not holding a thing against her.

I sling an arm 'round Leira's midsection. The brawl so far has been hairy, but she's been a trooper. I have no doubt she would be more sparkly if I hadn't nearly drained her, or if she'd been in her watery haunt.

Her hide's gone all splotchy again, and it's just killing me, like a splintered stake grazing my heart.

Nah, the blame isn't on anyone but Serafina. No matter what Leira and I have done to each other, Serafina is the super witch causing all the chaos.

In the village, kids frolic in the street, getting a last bit of sunshine before tucking in. Mums yank laundry off the line. Das tinker with tools. The houses here aren't anything grand, but they're cozy and warm, and vamps patrol, keeping the riffraff in check and protecting the people, especially the families of crimsons. I hate to admit it, but people are a commodity for vamps. We need them. We don't go about offing them willy-nilly.

Not as Serafina would have us do.

As the bloody screech of a shadow wraith tears through the night, I catch sight of a couple of vampguards. "Oi! Shadow wraiths!" I bark as Regalith charges ahead. "Seven of the monsters. Round up everyone and get 'em inside. Sound the alarm!"

The vampguards kick into motion, all blurry and intense. Travers and Mavis are tucked away on the far side of town, but luck is on our side; it sounds as if the ghosties are behind us. Me and Leira are hollering at folks to haul their hides indoors. Then the village bell chimes, and suddenly everyone's hustling as if their lives depend on it.

They know the sight of Regalith and aren't afraid of him, but perhaps his haste should have tipped them off.

A bunch of vamps are cruisin' with us now. "They're hightailin' it to the mage smith!" I holler, and they zoom on ahead.

A chill sweeps past as the sun disappears. Shadow wraith magic has taken a fancy to this village, and I feel it crawling under my skin. Bet I'm not the only one getting the heebie-jeebies from their sickening aura.

"Come on, Rega! Come on!"

My blade is drawn. Leira's alert and stiff in my arms.

"Stay out of the way," I huff. "Don't let them slice into you with their blades, yeah, love?"

"I'll be fine."

I spy the cottage and the smithy. Black mist tumbles along the ground. Four vamps are herding two tiny people from the smithy along the path to their crib. Travers balls his fist in his ironclad gauntlet, and Mavis grips her crystal staff with both hands. The tip's already glimmering in the fading light as her mojo flows through it. They're right tough opponents with their magics, their weapons just amp up what they're packing.

A mounted shadow wraith barrels down on 'em, coming from the side.

"Incoming!" I shout.

One of the vamps makes a sweeping cut, causing the horse to stumble. The shadow wraith rolls across the ground, but quickly rises, brandishing a sword that could light up a dark alley.

Regalith slams into another incoming rider, forcing the horse into a wicked tumble.

It's all out mayhem. Gripping my blade, I hurl myself off Regalith, and bam! With sweet satisfaction, I carve through that shadowy ghostie's hide. The wraith dances between shadow and flesh, but my enchanted blade won't have none of that. With a final quiver, he goes up in a puff of black smoke.

"Yeah!" I shake my shoulders and thump my chest threateningly. "All right! That's how you nail these nasties!" I spin toward the group. "Da!"

Travers whirls in time to crack his gauntlet into the kneecap of a wispy wraith. Wham! The creature buckles, and I simply slide my blade through his back and into his heart.

I release a primal roar.

Mavis is zappin' those ghosties with sparks shootin' from her staff while Regalith is knockin' those riders off their high horses and spookin' 'em so bad the horses are scramblin' for the hills!

The vamps don't have the proper blades. The best they can do is keep them off my fosters until I swoop in, but together, we're making headway. I plunge my blade into another shadow wraith a vamp is gripping by the throat.

I recognize the vampire. "Nice hustle, Gravian!"

He gives a nod, all cool and nonchalant, then lets out this vicious snarl at another foe.

Hold up. Leira's not on Regalith. I spin, slicing across a wraith's ribs before clocking him in the mug to send him flying. "Leira!"

My gob falls open when I spot her. She's waving a sodding rake as if it's some fancy bo staff, clashing staff and steel with a bloomin' shadow wraith.

"That's my girl!" She's darn good too, her feet doing a dance I can't keep up with.

I don't have time to gawk, and pivot to gut another fiend. My blade arm is covered in black gore. Specks dot my face and clothes, burnin' my bare skin.

I battle my way over to Leira.

With a sharp jab to the ghostie's wrist, she knocks his sword away. Her eyes brighten with success, and I'm behind him, ready for the plunge, when Leira gasps with round, fearful eyes as if she's seen a phantom.

My blade sinks into his flesh, and I've got him braced to keep him off Leira, but a black arm has shot out, and I can't see the metal claws of his freakin' gauntlet—

Because they've sunk into Leira.

"You mangy bastard!" I yell.

He dissolves into a grim cloud, making me drop my blade and pitch forward. I just have time to stumble and catch myself against Leira.

He gored her just under the right collarbone. As she rasps her breaths and froths blood, I gather her against my chest. "Leira! Leira!" Her arms dangle at her sides as I hoist her under the armpits to get a better hold.

Gravian dives for the blade at my feet and strikes down another shadow wraith rounding on us. "Get her inside!" he yells. "We've got the last one!"

I get Leira up into my arms. "Da! Mum!"

"It's an ice gauntlet wound!" Mavis cries. "We're gonna have to burn the poison out. Bring her to the smithy."

I blur ahead of them, and once inside, as I whirl about to find a place to lay her, Mavis rushes in and points her staff at a workbench. The silent command she throws sends every heavy tool clattering to the floor.

"Quickly," Mavis huffs. Travers is already at the forge, with a twisted magical rod shoved into the flames.

I gingerly lay my limp sister out on the crusty surface. Mavis throws her limber form up onto a stool to get a good look.

Already, snaking black lines run across Leira's skin from the four bloody finger holes in her chest.

I bite into my wrist, drawing blood. But Mum grabs my hand. "No! The poison will draw in that which makes it stronger. Vampire blood would be its perfect catalyst."

I growl. "Da, how's that flaming rod coming?"

Leira's unexpectedly all twitchy, eyes popping wide open as if she got hit with a bolt of lightning. She flails around like a fishie outta water, clueless about what's going on.

"Love! Love! Leira!" I jam her shoulders back. "It's Draven. Draven. You've got a bit of poison in you. We're gonna take care of it. I promise."

Mavis hovers the crystal tip of her staff over the ribbons of poison, muttering a wicked incantation that draws the poison back.

Leira shivers. "I'm cold." Her pleading eyes are round, the pupils blown.

"It's the poison, little bit. Mum's working on it, yeah?"

Mavis nods while not breaking her chant.

At her side, Leira's hand searches about, grasping at the air, until I seize it between mine. I hold it up and plant a kiss to her tough hide before looking into her eyes. "I've got you. You trust me, yeah?"

She winces with pain, but her chin dips.

While keeping hold on her hand, I sweep a palm across her temple, pushing back her swamp of hair. Beside me, Mavis is dripping with sweat, her concentration flagging.

"Daaa…" I say carefully, not taking my eyes from Leira's.

"It's ready!" he gruffs. "Brace her!" With the glowing rod, he clamors up onto a stool next to Mavis. "We gotta do this for each wound."

Leira sees it coming and grips me hard, but I gotta pry her hand off to hold her down. With an arm over her torso and the other across her collarbone, I push into her. "Now!"

Travers shoves the rod right into the first bloody wound. Leira lets out a gut-wrenching scream. Her legs flail, but I clamp down, keeping her midsection steady. Da just holds that rod in her sizzling flesh as if it's no big deal while Mum works her magic, shoving the poison back into the heat until it scorches away.

Along with the hiss of black smoke, the stench of her charred hide fills the room.

Leira's out cold from the pain.

Travers sticks the rod into her wounds three more times, burning the poison and cauterizing her skin. I stroke Leira's hair and look into her lifeless face.

"I'm really sorry, bit," I say as Da pulls away the final time and hops down from his stool. "So sorry, but I'll fix all the scars once Mum says the poison's gone." Since Leira's having a right needed kip, I kiss her forehead. "What she won't know…" I trail off when I see Mum staring at me with a hand on her hip.

Mavis smirks then and rubs my arm. "That poison should be gone. You can give her your blood to speed the healing."

"Think I should wait a spell while she rests? I don't think she'll like me forcing my blood on her again."

"Again?" she asks.

"Yeah, again." I sigh as I scan Leira's battered body.

"Let's at least get her inside and cleaned up." Mavis checks over Leira's red skin. "Siren, Draven?"

"Yeah."

"We need to get her into the tub right away."

Hating that I have to jostle her, I scoop Leira up into my arms. "Lead the way."

Mum and Da jog ahead to fill the tub in the washroom. I'm cradling Leira to me tightly, nuzzling her forehead as I pick my steps carefully so as not to jar her.

Regalith is loafing between the cottage and the forge. He lets out a throaty whine.

"She'll be all right, Rega. No worries."

He shuffles his paws and tucks his head on them, setting up camp for the night as watch kitty.

"Good boy, Rega," I say before nudging the door to the cottage open.

I find Da checking the temperature as the water runs into the tub. Mum is emptying what's left of the salt crock into the water. "I'll run next door and borrow some more."

"Temp good?" I ask Da.

"Yep. Let's get her in." He's careful to steer her feet while I lean and guide her from my arms. I coax her half-floating body back. Once she's settled, I work to gather her reckless hair. Someone has got to teach her how to tame this mop. I didn't see the need when it was wafting about her under the sea, but if she's gonna be on land with me, someone'll have to give her a lesson on how to braid.

With me. On land.

I swallow. Yeah, I'm thinkin' of it.

I crack myself on the cheek and swear.

Da punches me in the arm for my colorful language.

Feeling my face flush, I rub my arm. My parents may be a few feet shorter, but nobody messes with Da. "Sorry, pops."

Mum bursts in and dumps more salt around Leira and swishes it into the mix. The water is once again grimy from all the crud Leira picks up. I dip her head back to wet her remaining locks, and Mum dunks a rag in the water and sponges her face.

"She's pretty, Draven."

My brow pinches tightly. "She's gonna be all right, yeah?"

"Of course, dearest. But you're gonna tell me how you found this one, 'cause I can tell you really like her."

I scoff and pet Leira's head. "Not love, Mum?"

"Maybe love, son. Maybe. You do care for her, yeah?"

"Yeah." I press my fist to my mouth. "Darn it, I do."

She chuckles.

Da's standing with his arms crossed over his chest, surveying the scene. "Now why don't you tell us why you brought a siren inland, yeah?"

I groan and start into the whole tale, and it ends with Mum hugging me with tears in her eyes. "I'm just so happy to see you, my big vampy lug."

Chapter 24
Leira

My body is stiff despite the soft bed I find myself in, but the discomfort is not what wakes me.

My belly rumbles. I'm ravenous.

I groan and prod my body. A shadow wraith speared me with his metal glove. As well as the soreness, I feel four bumps intermingled with the scales on my chest.

I wince as my fingertips analyze the damage that disrupts the pattern of my scales, moving carefully to my sternum.

I freeze when I feel an unusual ridge.

My sternal scale has grown halfway in.

My stomach turns. I frown.

A useless scale. Not a thing magical about it.

I lift my brows. My hide is at least supple and hydrated. How did Draven manage that?

I slow my breaths when I catch voices talking softly in the other room, just loud enough for me to make out the conversation. I turn my head toward the sounds.

Travers and Mavis sit at a table, with mugs in their palms. Draven's across from them, dwarfing the furnishing, impatiently scratching his nails into the wood. Mavis strikes out across the table with a wooden spoon and smacks his hand.

I smirk. Was she holding on to that just to hit him?

Draven snorts and pulls his hands back into tight fists. "So what do you think? Serafina's off her rocker, yeah? There can't be any truth to her words. Leira's a siren through and through."

I hold my breath so I can hear better.

Mavis looks at Travers before speaking. "We saw King Asmodear, Draven. We saw him that night, coming from Serafina's chambers."

Draven rocks just once in his seat. "What do you mean?"

"Do we have to spell it out for you, son?" Travers asks. "Serafina and your father were together—intimately."

The agitated vampire slaps the table. "I know what you meant!"

"She saw us, just before she said goodnight to Asmodear and closed her door," Mavis says. "She knows we know."

I blow out a measured breath. This cannot be true. Even if they did witness their king and my mother having a parting, it doesn't mean their coming together resulted in my conception.

Does it?

I narrow my eyes at the group in the other room. This is not proof that King Asmodear is my father.

That I'm Draven's half-sister.

And that Daddy has selflessly raised me knowing I'm another man's child. No. Why would he take me from Serafina, exile her, and raise me?

Unless he despised her that much that he would steal her child.

But why wouldn't King Asmodear come for me? True, Lunaris is far under the sea, and the lands above the sea have never wanted anything to do with our kingdom, but he could have come. If I was his daughter, he could have come. With magic, there is always a way.

Unless he didn't want me. Unless he was sure I was not his daughter.

None of it makes sense, yet I feel a terrible, worrying pressure under my sternum.

Draven wags his head at his foster parents. "No. No. You couldn't have seen him." He bolts up from his seat, making a ruckus that frightens my heart. "She's not my bloody sister!"

I bite my lip, pull my covering up to my chin, and cower as Draven waves his hands and paces.

Mavis shoves off her seat and hurries after him. "Draven! I'm sorry, but it's true. I know you have strong feelings for Leira, but she is your sister."

He throws his hands up and snarls. "Forget this. Forget all the lies. All the bloomin' things Serafina insists we believe. I'm not gonna! She's a witch! With a capital W." He pauses and rounds in on himself, growling and hissing under his breath. When he jerks his chin up, his eyes are black and his fangs lengthened. He clenches his fists until the pointed fingernails that have emerged in his vampy state slice into his palms.

"Oh, don't do that!" Mavis shrieks and makes a grab for his wrist, but he yanks his hands high above her head and turns his back on her.

Several drops of his blood hit the floor.

"I gotta find Lysandra's parents anyway," he snarls. "Gotta tell them they won't be expecting a daughter home this month, 'cause I failed someone else I'm responsible for! Them and all my other crimsons!"

With that, he barges from the cottage, slamming the door behind him. Mavis stops near the door, with both fists tucked to

her face.

"Draven." His name falls from my lips with barely a breath.

Mavis rubs her eyes as Travers comes over and pulls her into his arms. I never expected his parents to be short. Perfect miniatures of adult humans, just a bit smaller. What hits me right in the feels is the love I've seen for Draven, even in this small window that I've been conscious around them.

And though I don't understand why I care so much, Draven's hurting. He needs someone.

I toss the covers back and swing my legs over the bed's edge. My limbs are shaky, but I stagger across the space and into the common area.

Mavis and Travers spin to help me, but I shoo them off and tumble toward the exit. "I'm going after him."

I throw the door open to find it's the dead of night. The moon's past its zenith, so morning must be a few hours away. I can just see the shapes of plants in a garden—

The fence around the cottage—

The great big lump of a creature. Regalith's two large eyes gleaming at me in the dark. He gives me a slow blink, then turns his head to indicate something across the way.

Two figures are clutching each other in the lit doorway of a cottage.

I peer through the darkness while blindly rubbing Regalith's head when he nudges me.

Draven's on his knees before them, his head bowed as he murmurs words that are broken and pained.

"I couldn't save her," he says. "She was my responsibility, my crimson, and I couldn't protect her." He stays in his tiny, humble ball, pressing his palms into his thighs.

Regalith makes a concerned chirp. I step away from the warmth of his feline body.

The woman, who must be Lysandra's mother, sinks to her knees and pulls Draven into her arms and sobs against his neck. The man grips the woman's shoulder but remains stoic.

These people know Draven. They were his neighbors. They don't seem to hate him for what happened. They're not yelling, not threatening him.

The woman lifts Draven's chin so their eyes meet and she brushes his tears away.

So caringly.

And suddenly the weight of the past day or so hits me hard. I'm spinning. The events fly at me, and I'm no longer sure what's important. Who matters. Why I'm even here.

Is any of this real?

Who is this vampire—on his knees begging these strangers for forgiveness—who twists me up inside, who makes me so angry and yet has made me feel more than I have ever experienced in my entire existence?

I hate him!

No, I don't.

It's not hate.

A strange feeling washes over me, trembling my body. I swallow and draw a sharp breath, not understanding anything. Not now. Not anymore.

As the woman coaxes Draven to his feet and invites him inside, I'm suddenly gasping panicked breaths and fighting the urge to scream or rip out the flowers beside me or—

A wounded sound tears from my throat, piercing the night. It crashes like a wave, only to rear up and, with anguish, knock against me again and again.

I can't make the mournful sympathy stop.

Draven jerks in my direction, his eyes wide as if he expects to find Regalith noshing on me. I catch the shine of his fangs in the moonlight as if he's ready for a battle.

I startled him.

I've startled myself.

With a squeak, I turn and barrel off into the night.

"Leira!" Draven calls, his hand outstretched.

I'm wading through scratchy plant life, tripping over rows of leafy balls, until finally I tumble and land sprawled in some cultivated patch. I press up to my shins and round over my knees. My body won't behave. Won't stop quaking. The wounded sound spills from my mouth, my throat.

My face is damp, as if I'm tilting my face up under a water trickle in Lunaris.

This thought of home only makes the wail come harder, louder.

I miss home. Want home.

Draven wouldn't be there.

This thought stabs me under my sternum.

With anger, I pry at my sprouting sternal scale.

“I hate this!” I shout. “I don’t want it!”

I sense a stirring of air, then a molten touch envelops me, pressing into my back, my shoulders, brushing along my jaw.

Draven’s pulling me into his arms, sliding my hands away from where I’ve dug at myself. “Easy, little bit. Let it be now.”

I gnash at him and shove at his embrace, but he works my hands down and away.

“Come on. Deep breaths.” We’re crushing the crunchy green stuff around us as we shift. He’s holding me and cooing into my ear. “Leira, love. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.”

His warm breath tickles the rim of my ear and my racking motions slow.

I sniffle. “Don’t cry?” I wipe the warm moisture from my face and, smelling salt, hold it to my nose to sniff. Confused, I mumble, “Sirens can’t cry. I’m not crying.”

Draven nuzzles my cheek. “You’re wrong, love.” He lifts his hand, and a confident thumb swipes the wetness from my cheek. He takes an investigative sniff, then he licks his thumb. “Salty. Yep. Tears, love. You’re crying.”

I release a breath of astonished air. “That’s impossible.” A sharp, spasming breath jars my whole chest then. My eyes wide, I press my palms into my chest.

The odd breath happens again.

Draven snickers. “A hiccup now, love. It happens as your tears are drying up.”

I blink and feel a line of moisture leak down my right cheek. It drips off my chin and hits the ground.

“Right in the cabbage patch,” Draven says as he caresses my cheek. “Mum is going to kill us.”

“I’m sorry.” I hiccup again.

“Don’t be.” He sniffles and then settles onto his butt and pulls me into his lap. “Why the tears, bit?” His face presses against mine, his nose trailing along my hide, his furrowed forehead stamping mine. He chuckles softly. “I gotta say, I don’t like it.”

I pull back. “Huh?”

Draven sweeps his hot palms under my hair and braces my neck as he draws me in. “I did this, didn’t I? I know it, love. You wouldn’t be feelin’ any of this if I hadn’t wrecked you.”

“You’re so sure it’s always you.”

Warm air huffs from his nostrils. “The sun revolves around me, princess.”

Even though his tone is teasing, I snort and then hiccup.

“That helps a bit, yeah? Inane Draven and his ramblings.” His hand cups my cheek, his thumb skating over my lip. His voice gets soft. “I live to serve. To please.” My mouth curls upward under his thumb. “To make you smile.”

His own mouth nears mine as his thumb slides away. I smooth my palms over his chest and push. “Draven…” He’s like solid rock that doesn’t budge, but he at least halts his incoming lips.

“You know, don’t you?” he says. “You heard me raving about you being my sister. You heard what Mum and Da said, didn’t you?”

I nod.

“Come on, Leira. You can’t believe that.”

“I don’t want to, because you do realize that means I’ve never known my real father.” I tilt my face down. “I shouldn’t believe it, because then that would mean I’m not Daddy’s littlest siren and that he could never love me the way a real father should.”

“I don’t buy that. Look at Travers and Mavis. They love me more than my father ever could. He just didn’t have it in him to give more than he had. While he was never a bad guy to me, he wasn’t the greatest king, I’m told. Ruling does something. It changes a person, but Travers and Mavis, they gave all they had as my parents. It’s what you put into it.”

“Hmm.” A breeze brushes over us, and I shiver. Draven briskly rubs my upper arm, but then his touch slows as it tickles over a spread of scales I have there.

“So what are we going to do, Leira? Am I calling you *sister* forever more?” He grunts, and his tone thickens. “Am I gonna have to stop thinking about your moist siren lips and how they fit against mine so well?”

I catch the gleam of moonlight on his fangs.

“And your saucy fish hips and how I die every time I catch them sashaying away from me.” His hand glides over the scales of my hips and splays over my abdomen.

I find myself sucking in to make space between us, but his hand remains firm and certain.

His next words are barely sounds. “The way your scales dazzle and beg my tongue to lave every single one?” He dips his face and trails his tongue along the spray of scales along my temple.

I whimper as I tilt my face to the sky. Draven’s persistent lips whisper over my eyelids. His nose nuzzles my brow. He drops tiny kisses as he noses my hairline.

“What am I going to do about being in love with my sister?” He nips my earlobe.

“Draven.” I grin, but my tone is chastising. “Give me a break.”

“You don’t feel as torn as I do, huh?”

“You’re torn? I think your devious palms sliding over my scales tell another story.” I pry a hand of his off my belly and lift it to my sharp teeth. With a hiss, I bite into the side of his index finger, just enough to tease, to hurt, to leave an impression.

Draven groans. “Don’t, little bit.” He releases me and flops back into the cabbages, making me lose balance and topple next to him.

The ground is damp, and the earth sticks to my hide wherever I press.

“Ouch!” My hand catches something sharp. “Ow! There’s something sharp in here.” I hold my palm face up to examine it as Draven rolls up.

He braces my palm, then lifts it to his lips. His tongue swipes over the wound. Once. Twice. Again. “There.” He kisses my cut. “I’ve sealed the wound.”

“How? I thought I needed your blood.”

“Vamp serum. It clots wounds, while the venom keeps them open.” He feels the garden soil around us, and I lean away to give him room. “Hold still. There is something sharp here. A few somethings.”

He finally displays what he’s collected in his hand. A set of dark, shiny stones glimmer in the dim light. Draven squints, pokes the stones, and then sniffs them. “They’re shards of something. Obsidian?” He feels the edges of one. “Hella sharp. This is what cut your palm, no doubt. Question is, what are they doing in mum’s garden?”

I shrug.

Draven draws his knees up to stand. “Be careful coming in, yeah? Let’s get these inside and check them out.” He helps me up with one hand while closing his fist around the stones.

“Your hands!” I take his free one to inspect it. “You pierced them with your nails earlier.” Of course, there’s no wound. Only dried blood.

“Healed.” Draven steers me toward the house. “You saw all that, huh?”

I scoff. “You’re kind of moody.”

Draven releases a mix of laughter and disbelieving huffs. “Yeah, we’ll just call it that.”

Chapter 25
Draven

We're a complete mess, Leira and I, once again covered in blood, and dirt from the cabbage patch.

I toss the obsidian shards onto the table as I drag Leira to the kitchen sink. Da and Mum must have decided it was safe to go to bed.

"We gotta wash up, love." I point to the trail of dirt we made coming into the house. "Can't give Mum another reason to kill us." I look her up and down. Other than the dirt, somehow I managed to get blood on her face. Most likely from my palms when I dug my nails into them.

As I reach for a rag, Leira says, "I think it's going to take more than a piece of cloth."

I close my eyes as I wet it under the faucet. I'm knackered to the core, and needing a crimson, and I still gotta fix Leira's scars, and we need sleep, and now that my parents are safe, Leira and I gotta get back to the palace and find out what other mischief Serafina's up to and stop her.

I drop the cloth into the empty basin, and lean, pressing my palms into the bottom.

"What's wrong?" Leira picks up the cloth and fingers it. "It's fine. I didn't mean anything by what I said. We can just wash up here."

I puff out a hot breath. "I'm just feeling the utter insignificance of everything I've done in my life up until this point. I mean, what have I done to help anyone? Look how many people have died. And Serafina's gonna kick us to the abyss and back. She's gonna win, Leira. We won't be able to stop her."

"I'm not sure how we will, but we can get help. Daddy. He's powerful, Draven." Leira starts rubbing the cloth over her arms and shoulders.

I screw up my exhaustion and take a good look at her. She's doing a lousy job of scrubbing the dirt off. I'm gonna chalk that up to the whole under the sea gig, no need for baths and whatnot.

I jerk the cloth from her, and in frustration, toss it to the other side of the room so that it lands with a satisfying splat.

"Hey!" she shrieks.

"You really haven't got a clue what you're doing, do you, princess? Like an itty-bitty kitten trying to bathe a felinor."

"I get the principle." She stomps across the room but, as she bends to pick up the cloth, she crumples with a howl of agony.

"Leira!" I blur over and sink to the floor with her and pull her into my arms so that she's leaning with her back to my chest.

"I don't think I should be out of bed," she murmurs.

"You're missing some blood, love." Without hesitating, I chomp into my wrist and stick it out for her. "Drink."

She wags her head.

"Come on, bit. We need to fix those scars. Da patched you up, but there's still some mending for you to do." I shake my wrist. "Drink."

She exhales as she slumps against me. "Fine."

I stick my wrist to her mouth, and she huffs air against my skin before she rounds her mouth over me. I relax back against the wall when I finally feel the pull from my veins.

I shut my eyes. My scalp has these funny tingles, and my insides are drawing tight. I can feel Leira's sharp teeth grazing me as she sucks, and I gotta say, I'm fighting hard to keep from biting into her myself and letting my venom lift through her.

But that won't do us any favors. I can't mess with her head like that and make her think she's falling for me.

My fingers skim over her wounds, gauging their external healing. Leira shifts as if she's trying to tell me she's had enough.

"Just a bit more, love."

"Mmmh!" She tears her mouth away and twists away from my chest. "What about you?"

The blood coating her teeth and lips makes me groan from wanting to lick and kiss the stain away. I don't even bother to suppress a vocal groan.

"There're crimsons in town." I skate a thumb over her lips and then lick the blood from the pad. "I can get a fix later. You need this." I grunt. "Drink, Leira." I pause and narrow my eyes. "Or I'm gonna kiss you."

"That's a threat?" She turns and nuzzles against my chest.

Oh, hell. I initially stiffen away. "Yeah!" Letting my idiocy win, I tuck my face into her hair. "Not scary enough for you?"

Her head wags. I steal her chin and lift her face so I can look at her lips. "You are teasing me on purpose, love. I know you don't feel about me the way I feel about you."

Her eyes are closed, so I tease my parched lips over hers, just the faintest press, but the restraint is killing me.

I'm completely sucked in. I guess this is it. I can't deny how I feel now.

I am in love with my half-sister.

Bloody hell.

Leira twists suddenly and crushes her lips to mine as her hands sweep up along my neck and behind my head.

I'm surprised, but I gotta go with it. I'm too selfish not to, and as my palms rub up her back, Leira's rising to her knees and pushing on my chest, until I feel as if I'm floating back, but instead, I crash to the floor, and Leira dives on top of me. Her legs find my waist and straddle me, and still she's kissing me. Her teeth graze my skin, and I'm trying to arch up to meet her, but she's pushing me down, pinning me, and I'm moaning into all the sensations she's triggering.

I'm not gonna fight this. She hums into my mouth, and I open wide for the sweep of her tongue, and then they're tangling together, and I wanna drink from her.

I'm gonna die if I don't drink from her.

Her unruly hair has veiled us from the world. I open my eyes to see if her peepers are checking me out, 'cause I gotta see those inky orbs.

She rocks over my midsection, and I whimper, down right whimper like a pansy. Then I'm snickering against her lips and cradling her neck.

All of a sudden, her eyelids fly open, and I get a right sense of the deviousness behind them.

Before I can figure out what this fishie's up to, pain lances my bottom lip. My mouth gapes in alarm, but then I feel her swollen, overly kissed lips clamp down on mine, and the draw of blood through the wound.

A thousand swear words collide into each other in my head, but I can't do more than flutter my eyelids and groan. The harder she sucks, the more my lip swells, and I can't help but think how this is a comeuppance I didn't know I wanted.

She's rounding over me, her shoulder scrunched in earnest as she imprisons my face. When I try to take command of her cheeks, she yanks my hands away and pins them above my head.

I let this go on for a mite too long, sinking into the bliss of the selfish torture she's inflicting, but then with a conflicted groan, I wrench my mouth away.

I like it too much, and Leira has no idea.

I am surprised by her grunt of dismay and the mouthful of blood leaking from her gaping mouth onto my chest.

She wasn't having a little sip, no.

I gawk up at her as blood from my lip trickles down my jaw.

As a massive letdown crushes me—'cause I want nothing more than to take that filthy, stained mouth with mine—I sigh and roll up, simultaneously pushing her back so that she's straddling my lap. My lip is right puffy, I'm aroused as all get out, and Leira, with her mouth finally closed, is pouting like a naughty kitty.

I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth and release the serum in the glands under my tongue and then lick my lip until the bleeding stops. "I deserved that, yeah, I know." I brush her mop of hair off her forehead. "But I'm gonna let you in on a secret, bit. Maiming my lip like that didn't have the effect you thought it would." I swipe some blood from my chin and lick it off, then I go for her and lap the gore from her jaw, working my way down her throat, 'cause she's coated in traces of me.

Leira's suddenly moaning and sinking her talons into my chest.

"Oi, love!" I snatch her hands away. "We're gonna have to play nice. We've spilled too much blood. Gotta save some, yeah?"

There's a commotion to my left, and there's Mavis, hands on her hips, her eyes afire. "I leave you two to steal some shuteye, and this is what I come out to find!" She grabs her broom from the corner and sweeps it back, ready to strike.

Leira scrambles off my lap before Mum can give me a proper smacking. The broom's scratchy straw whacks into my back, and I have to snort 'cause of its ineffectiveness.

"Look at the state of you!" she hollers as she whacks me again. "Were you rolling in the dirt? And covered in blood! I know you don't drink from your crimsons like a thirsty, sex-depraved teenager! Have a little dignity!"

I scramble away from her attack. "Mum! Mum! I was just healing her." I stand and trip to the other side of the room.

Yeah, I'm gonna need a refill.

"Healing her? That's what they call it now, yeah?" Mum asks.

"Yeah!"

Leira's backed into a corner with her palms covering her mouth, looking like a saucy vixen, the guilt all written in her bright peepers.

I shake a finger at her. "You're dead, Leira. You are so dead!"

She squeals as I dodge Mum's broom once more and barrel down on her. I snag her by the waist and spin her off her feet, which makes her throw her head back against my chest and laugh.

Mum stops in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips. "I don't see how being coated in blood and mud, and tracking it all through my house is funny." Mum shakes her head and turns to survey the mess.

Her gaze lands on the table and the obsidian. She hurries over and scoops the rough tear-dropped shapes up. "Draven, what's this? Where did you get these?"

I deposit Leira onto her feet, and we stumble closer. “Found ’em in the garden.”

“The garden?”

“Leira and I were out there, and she cut her hand on one.”

Mavis snorts. “That explains that dirt, I suppose.”

Leira blubbers some words. “We didn’t mean to smash the—”

I clamp my palm over her mouth while trapping her back to my chest.

“Cabbages,” Leira says, but the word is muffled.

I stick my lips against her ear and whisper, “How about we don’t mention the cabbages, yeah, bit?”

She mutters something into my hand, and I choose not to take it as “I hate you, Draven.”

Mum is examining the obsidian, poking at it, rolling it between her fingers. “Leira, were you upset? Perhaps crying?”

She nods, my palm still muffling her. I nuzzle her ear before scoffing and releasing her.

Leira doesn’t move away from the heat of my chest.

“Siren tears,” Mum breathes.

My brows lift. “Siren tears?”

“Sirens can’t cry in the ocean, and their tears rarely fall onto land. But when they do, I’ve heard of magical flora sprouting, fey even, and valuable gemstones. Here we get seemingly unimpressive volcanic rock, but obsidian has powerful properties. It’s a stone of clarity.” Mum quirks her eyebrows. “Your tears turned into obsidian because you figured something out, didn’t you, sweetheart?”

Leira presses her lips tightly together.

I pivot her to face me. “What did you figure out, love?”

She just blinks up at me with her seemingly wide innocent peepers.

“Leira?” I prod.

She keeps her lips shut and her focus blank.

Mum isn’t into the show Leira’s making, which I know is just to rile me. “I know just what we can do with one of these that’ll give you a weapon to destroy that sea witch.” Mum opens her mouth. “Travers! Wake up! We’ve got work to do!”

Chapter 26
Leira

Draven and I both spin toward Mavis. “Destroy the Sea Witch?” we say in unison. I hiss before shoving Draven in the shoulder and stepping toward Mavis.

I can’t express how relieved I am that Mavis starts bustling about and Travers stumbles from his room.

Draven has momentarily forgotten what Mavis suggested, that I figured something out.

I’m still figuring it out, so I don’t have any answers for Draven—

About why I pounced on him.

I do not know why I did that, and when I caught myself in the act, I shifted gears—because biting him would cover any explanation—because what the heck was I thinking?

I needed blood to heal, so there. That’s all there was to it.

What exactly did I figure out?

I shrug to myself as I watch Draven roll a piece of obsidian around on his palm. His face is pinched as if he’s not really pondering all the mystical properties of obsidian and really pondering why his sister’s lips were pressed to his.

Mavis has pulled out a tiny, but heavy bowl and a strange rod. Mixing tools of some sort. “We can forge a weapon, dearest!”

Travers yawns as he tries to figure out the excitement in his wife.

Her voice is enthusiastic as she practically throws the bowl and rod onto the table, and then goes for a thick tome on a shelf. Travers hustles over and helps her heave the book onto the table. It’s nearly half the size of Mavis’s upper body.

She hurriedly begins flipping through the pages.

“You mean the spell for the trident?” Travers asks. “That’s in the middle.” He reaches for the tome. “No, you’ve gone too far.”

Mavis shoos him away. “I know where it is!”

Travers fights a frown as he scratches his head. “But you know what the spell requires. We can’t ask Draven to—”

“I know what it wants!” Mavis growls.

“What does it require?” Draven hovers over his parents, looking over their shoulders as they find the page. “I’ll do it. I don’t care what it is.”

Every spell has a consequence. I know this. I’ve been taught this.

“It’s really a combination of spells,” Mavis mutters as she scans the pages and continues to flip them. “One spell to imbue the object, which will give you a certain promise of your intent, and has to be from your foe, Serafina, of course.” Mavis looks up as her finger finally points to a page with runic letters. She turns to me. “Your tears. Since you are her daughter. Your tears are her tears, one and the same. So the obsidian shard will meet this requirement of the spell.”

“Okay…” I say.

“But we’ll need to fortify the obsidian to make it stronger.” Mavis points to some runes I can’t read, but a picture on the side of the page shows a drop of liquid hovering over a stone as if about to melt over it.

“Imbue it with what?” Draven asks. “What are the other spells?”

“One to imbue. One of sacrifice. One of intent. The last of strength,” Mavis says, her face screwed up with concentration.

“What sort of sacrifice?” I ask.

“For a weapon against a foe, a specific foe, that which fortifies must have ties to the foe.”

“So again, you need something of Serafina’s,” Draven says. “Bloomin’ fantastic. What else do we have?”

Mavis shakes her head. “It must be a sacrifice…” I do not like the hesitant tone of her voice. “From a person who has ties with her.”

My brows go up. “So from me, then? Isn’t that what the tear represents.”

Travers shakes his head. “Draven’s blood is in Serafina. They are tied by blood.”

I don’t like this. “Who says the sacrifice must come from Draven?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “What else does the spell require?”

Travers and Mavis look at him.

Draven touches his chest. “What do I need to give up? What haven’t I already given? She took my blood. She took Ly from me. My crown. My crimsons!”

“She *took* those,” I mutter, starting to get that spells are really specific.

Mavis bobs her head. “The sacrifice has to be personal and given, from your person. It has to mean something, or the spell of sacrifice will be meaningless.”

“Who says that?” I ask.

“This specific spell,” Travers says. “It’ll have to be from Draven. One part from Leira. One part from Draven.”

“What’re we talkin’ here? A finger? My daylight ring?” Draven prods his body, checking himself over. “What couldn’t I live without?”

His eyes lift to my face. For a moment, they’re transfixed on my eyes, then they drop to my lips and on down to rest on my sternal scale.

Draven’s eyelids fall closed. “I took your scale. A part of you. Something you would never give up because it’s a piece of who you are. I tore it from your freakin’ chest.”

Draven whirls from the table and paces the room, his body tense, the muscles in his arms and shoulders straining.

I straighten and follow his progress with my eyes. “But you *took* it.”

Draven whirls. His eyes are black. “Yeah, Leira. I took it. I’m the git. The callous, thoughtless prick who defiled you! It wasn’t a sacrifice you would have made.”

My nostrils flare as I try to push down the anger that still surfaces. “So then what would hurt if I took something from you?” I grind out.

He jerks his hand up. “My daylight ring. You took it.”

“Think harder,” Mavis says. “The daylight ring was manufactured.”

“I don’t see you offering up any suggestions, Mum!”

“This has to come from you. This is something you have to figure out.”

Draven snarls. “I need a crimson.” He starts for the door of the cottage but pauses with his hand on the knob.

Then he swears. Shakes his head and swears again.

With a great big hiss, he strides over to the kitchen and throws open a deep drawer. After a moment of rummaging, his hands emerge with the largest, heaviest looking hinged metal instrument I’ve ever seen.

“What are you doing—?” I begin.

Draven turns the metal instrument on himself, aiming for his mouth. His fangs have emerged, joining his black eyes. In his ire, his frustration, he’s completely vamped out.

He clamps that instrument around his right fang.

“No!” I scream.

With one swift pull, the entire shiny length of his fang, root attached, flies from his mouth. Draven swears as the fang and the tool clatters to the floor, along with a pool of blood and fluid.

Mavis and Travers are quick. She scuttles after the fallen tooth, and Travers grabs a dish to catch the blood coming from Draven’s mouth. I don’t understand why they are so concerned about catching his blood.

Draven spits a mouthful into the bowl. “The other one too?” Bloody drool runs down his chin. He spits again. “Will the spell demand that?”

Mavis drops the tooth into the heavy bowl on the table. “You’ve done well. I think this will suffice.”

I soon realize I’m standing in the center of the room with my palms over my mouth to prevent myself from screaming in horror. For some reason, this has affected me more than seeing Draven desiccated.

Because I know.

When he ripped my nexus scale out, I felt it. I felt all the horror and powerlessness.

And mortification.

I can scarcely breathe. Those wretched tears are brimming in my eyes.

I swipe them away with ferocity.

Travers is coaching Draven through milking the gaping hole where his fang was, saying the venom added to the spell will strengthen it.

Finally, Draven closes his mouth and starts working his tongue around, which I hope is him clotting the wound with his healing serum. Travers and Mavis start chanting a spell over the fang. She presses the end of the rod over the tooth while speaking soft words. Draven and I wait, silent.

He’s not looking at me.

Every soundless seethe, every flare of his nostrils, every prod of the gap in his sneering expression cuts.

It’s not my fault! He wants Serafina gone just as much as I do.

I didn’t ask him to rip his fang out.

Why do I feel this terrible cold shoulder from him?

I start clenching my fists. My entire body tenses.

I blow out steady breaths while stealing glances toward my brother.

Mavis and Travers continue to work, her arm gradually tiring from working the hard tooth. Surely only magic can break it apart, and I’m right. Soon the tooth crumbles into fine powder.

I keep peeking at Draven. His face is red. His jaw hard. The veins in his neck and temple popping.

His tongue keeps going to the gap in his teeth.

His embarrassment validates his sacrifice. I might not know much about vampires, but I’m guessing their fangs are a

symbol of pride much like my nexus scale.

After another quick flick of my eyes in his direction, Draven suddenly whirls toward that door.

"I'll be after that crimson, then. Don't wait up." He barges out, slamming the door behind him.

With a squeak, I jump. "He wants to get rid of Serafina, right? This shouldn't upset him so much, should it?"

Travers starts pouring Draven's blood and venom into the bowl with the fang powder. "He'll be all right. He's just hangry. Let him rage around until he's sated. He'll come back in a better mood."

Oh, that's it?

Mavis and Travers add the bloody concoction to a bowl with an obsidian tear. Mavis hasn't stopped chanting. Soon my stone tear is hovering above the table, turning slowly, and gleaming from within itself.

Mavis stops her chanting.

The obsidian tear has grown longer, larger. Travers sticks his hand out, and the tear drops into it. As he clutches the pointy shard, which is larger than his hand, he says, "Now, Mavis, we go to work."

"To work?" I ask. If that wasn't work, then what are they going to do now?

"We shall forge a trident and attach the obsidian tear to it," Mavis says. "Then, you shall have a weapon that's guaranteed to kill the Sea Witch."

Chapter 27
Draven

I don't answer my crimson when she asks what happened to my fang and my lip. It's still battered up from Leira's little nibble, but not that I care about that.

My fang. Bloody hell, my fang.

Feeling more impotent than I can admit, I drink until my crimson is brown and my lip and gums stitch themselves together.

My tooth will have to wait. Nothin' I can do about it for now.

I give her a nod of thanks, then skulk back to Travers and Mavis's cottage. The forge is blazing, so my fosters are in the thick of it.

Crafting the weapon to destroy my nemesis.

I won't be able to help Mum and Da with their forging. It's magic mixing with iron, and they are old pros at this. I know better than to interrupt, especially when Mavis is flinging spells around.

I give Rega a little pat on the noggin', and boom, he's all purrs. "Why don't you go grab yourself a bite, huh?"

He gives me a nudge, really layin' on the worry.

"I'm good, mate. Promise."

Rega shuffles back, then gets up to do a big ol' stretch. I watch him scamper off into the trees before I lean my forehead against the cottage door, takin' a moment.

How am I supposed to walk in there and face Leira now? Will she be smirking? Pleased as punch that I got what was coming to me?

I snick the door open and slink inside. Meager light fills the living space, but I start toward the second bedroom, my room —

The room we got Leira holed up in.

Habit's got me moving toward it. All my stuff's stashed in there. Feels like I never even split.

Do I crash on that lumpy bench by the fire? Or slump down in Mum's old chair instead?

The sun's creepin' up fast, and me and Leira gotta bolt soon, but I'm beat. And I bet Serafina's halfway to Lunaris already. Leira's gotta be chewin' talons over it.

Oi, Leira!

I nudge the door open, surprised she shut herself in. The dim light seepin' into the dark shows me she's on her side and facing the wall, lying on top of the covers.

Her scales gleam at me, as if she's some coldhearted reptile princess.

And look at her, still got dirt smudges on her backside from rolling in the garden.

I shake my head. I can't believe the state we're in.

But hey, who am I to judge?

Toss it all.

Not being a mite gentle, I saunter over to my bed, to my sister, and throw myself onto it.

Just a flop that bounces the whole mattress, and I roll against Leira's back and bury my face in her tangle of hair.

"Don't worry," I murmur. "I'll get you to Lunaris, bit, I promise."

She tenses.

I keep rambling. "I'm sure everyone is okay. I know you're probably worried, but I have no doubt King Nereus is well equipped to handle her majesty."

Leira's awake, naturally, from my being a colossal jerk, but she doesn't move, doesn't say anything. Just goes back to breathing as if she's pulling a fast one on me, pretending she slept through my grand entrance.

Sure thing, love.

So you're telling me you aren't interested, not even a bit. You despise me from the depths of your soul.

Well, isn't that just charming?

I happen to be related to you, for crying out loud!

But what does that matter to the primitive instincts ruling my sorry existence? Bugger all, that's what.

Yet, I manage to keep my mitts to myself. Can't say the same about resisting her scent though. Smells like earth and brine, with a dash of fresh breeze. Everything a bloke could fancy in a dame who's all natural-like.

And those scales, that skin...

Crikey, it's enough to make a bloke's fingers twitch with longing. But no, I clench my fists tight to my chest.

After tonight, once we're back to Soundless Shores and then off to Lunaris, it's curtains for all this nonsense. Farewell to my fleeting fascination with a siren.

I tuck my knees up until they curl along with the shape of Leira's and shut my miserable eyes.

Just as I'm drifting into oblivion, she jolts the bed, hurling herself my way with all the subtlety of a ghalich demon in heat.

Comeuppance, I see.

I roll in slow motion onto my back and then let my appendages fall slack. "Leira, darling, could you maybe try not to thrash about like a fish outta water?"

Her limbs are suddenly tangling with mine, and she has her lithe frame pressed to my side. Her palms slide into the opening of my gaping shirt. This thing I haven't bothered with buttoning since I've put it on. It's ragged now and bound for the trash heap.

Her talons tease over my chest, but then her palm flattens against my skin and she's running it up my neck and playing her fingers along my jaw. I shiver from her warm breath in my ear before she trails a talon over my lips.

I freeze, not liking how she's so close to my teeth, to my one remaining fang.

"It will grow back, won't it?" she whispers. The pad of her thumb smooths over my lips, and her hand comes to rest along my jaw as she cups my face.

"No, love it won't. My fang is tied to the original curse. Blood might mend me, you're aware of that, but a flat, pearly tooth will sprout in its stead. No fang. Not ever."

Her noggin lands on my chest, and she's all draped on me, her little enchantress bumps pushing into my arm. Then she grabs my hand and drags it over until I'm grazing her bumps, but my fingers come to rest on her sternal scale.

It's whole. Finished.

"Like my scale, then," she whispers. "Useless."

I scoff. "Yeah, bit. Useless."

"I forgive you," she bluntly says.

This has me jerking away from her and crunching upright, but she yanks me back and dumps me on the bed.

"Cut it out, Leira! Lay off, will ya?" I bat her hands away, but she's wicked strong and keeps me down.

"Stop being a baby, Draven!" She slaps my hands as I fight her.

"You can't forgive me, Leira. I did some messed up stuff to you!" I shove her off, and she tumbles, but she's back on me in a flash, this time sliding a leg over my hips and pushing me into the bedding.

"My brother is a big cry baby! Wah, I can't let Leira forgive me because I have to be miserable. So your fang is missing!" She pushes both palms into me and makes me grunt. "Lysandra's dead! A bunch of other people are too. At least you're alive, barnacle head!"

"You can't even let me grieve this for half a second, can you, little witch? You're the pot, love, calling the kettle black."

Her face scrunches up. "What does that even mean?"

This time when I move, I crunch upright, bringing her with me, pushing her back onto my thighs as I bellow in her pretty, little face. "As if you weren't having a pity party, Leira, when I ripped your scale from your chest! Yeah, I did that? Did you forget?"

"Of course I didn't forget, prince baby!" She shifts to scramble off me and the bed. "Ugh! I never wanted a stupid brother anyway!" She growls. "I take everything back. I hate you!"

Just as her foot hits the floor, I snatch her wrist and yank her so that she's half straddling me. "Take every what back? What all are you taking back, Leira? What was it you figured out when you cried?"

Her pupils flick over my features. "I can't ever love you, Draven! It doesn't matter if you're my brother or not. It's just never going to happen so you can forget it!"

"Is that what you figured out? Well good!"

Neither of us budge an inch. We're locked in a stare-down, eyeball to eyeball. Though the room is dim from subtle light leaking in from the living space, I'm seeing her with miserable clarity in my vamp-out state.

'Cause I'm ticked off as all get out.

With one freakin' fang jamming into my bottom lip.

Leira's jaw twitches.

I'm not gonna fold. She's gotta make the move. She'll do it, the little witch is gonna buckle.

When the slightest tremor of her muscles indicates movement, I meet her attack.

Our lips are once again colliding. Leira's adjusting herself on my lap, but I tip her onto the bed and rise over her.

"See, pet?" I gasp between snatches of kisses. "You can't help yourself, can you?"

"Shut up," she hisses.

"You fight and fight, but this is it, isn't it?" I allow her to pull me back in for several more kisses before surfacing to say, "No thrall, no compulsion. This is real, and you know it."

"You better not say another word, *pet*."

I smirk against her lips. "I'll be your pet, love, yeah." I nip her lip with my lone fang but don't draw blood. "Don't think you can housebreak me though. I'm not that kind of vampire."

Chapter 28
Leira

Draven and I do finally fall asleep, but we're a tangle of limbs because we both argued and groused and kissed until sleep stole us.

How, after a night like that, can I be so conflicted in the morning?

The sunlight casts a golden glow through the eastern window when I hear Mavis clearing her throat in the doorway. Draven cracks an eyelid and turns his head toward her.

I peel my cheek off his chest.

My hide is dry from sleeping on linen all night. Fabric tends to soak the moisture right from my hide.

"Is it finished, Mum?" Draven's hand smooths over my back where it's been since we fell asleep.

"Ugh, I feel awful," I mumble. I start pushing myself over Draven to slide off the bed, but he does some swift vamp maneuver, and though my head ends up spinning, we're both standing upright, with his arms around me, bracing me to his chest.

"Rough night, love?" he teases as he sweeps my chin up as if he's going to kiss me.

As if he doesn't know.

"Ahem," Mavis says. "I have just the thing for what ails you, Leira, for your adventures inland. Come, come."

We follow her out into the living space. Mavis picks a squatty, blue glass bottle up off the table and then, next thing I know, she's squirting cold mist into my face.

I flinch and throw my hands up while Draven shouts, "Mum!"

"It's saltwater, you oaf!" She squirts me a couple more times. "I put it in a spritzer so you can carry it with you."

She hands it to me.

"A spritzer?" I pump the handle as Mavis did and try it out. To my delight, glorious saltwater mists out. I grin and, after a look at Draven, spray myself some more. "It's wonderful, Mavis! Thank you."

As Mavis scurries off to do some busy work in the kitchen, I'm busy soaking my entire body, extending my toes and pointing them while I spray my feet and legs, reaching around my waist, lifting my hair and soaking the back of my neck, slicking the water down my throat—until I notice Draven's bedroom eyes on me.

All over every inch of my scales and hide.

On my hips.

On my throat.

Watching the water drip between my swells.

I stop and slowly set the mister on the table. "Don't look at me like that," I whisper-hiss, feeling the weight of his gaze like a physical caress.

Draven strides over and, with a sensual graze across my shoulders, gathers my locks and twists them together behind my back. "Gotta do something with this mop, love. You're on land now. Might have to run a comb through it, yeah?" His fingers trail down the length, grazing my spine and swishing the long strands along the top of my bottom.

I whimper. I can feel the heat of his chest against my hide.

"Try to fight it, Leira," he whispers into my ear.

The fine hairs all over my hide stand on end. The tingles on my scalp make my shoulders draw up.

Draven steps closer, and his nose just grazes my earlobe when the front door flies open.

Travers barges in, and I release a held breath.

Draven jerks back as if he's guilty beyond belief.

He is. So guilty.

"Ta-da!" Travers holds both his hands out and presents a weapon as tall as he is. An iron trident gleams with a menacing luster, its shaft sturdy and reliable, crafted with obvious precision. On the middle tip, the shard of obsidian rests, jagged and dark against the metallic backdrop. "I just finished polishing her up. She's keyed to the queen, and to you both. You are her wielders only, and Serafina the recipient of its malice."

Draven swaggers forward and takes the trident. The metal immediately hums and glows subtly with light. "That's interesting." He turns it over in his hands and hefts it. "Da, this here, it's bloody brilliant." He turns to Mavis, who straightens from rummaging in a cupboard. "Thanks, Mum."

"You're welcome, son," she says. "There's just one more thing we have to tell you about it, and I'm afraid you won't like it."

Draven frowns. "Not something else I have to cut off or yank out, yeah?" His tongue scrapes along the gap in his teeth.

She shakes her head. "The shard must be broken off in the Sea Witch's heart for her to die."

He smirks. "That's not a problem, Mum."

"There's more, a magical consequence for using the trident to defeat the Sea Witch."

This makes me scowl.

"Whoever strikes the fatal blow will always feel the pain," Mavis says, "as if he or she is walking around with a broken shard piercing his or her heart. That is the price for using this magic to kill."

I step forward and wrap my palm around the shaft. "I'll do it."

"Like hell you will." Draven glares at me. "Already cursed and undead, aren't I? A bit more discomfort won't ruffle my feathers. I'll do it, love."

I put my other hand on the shaft and give it a tug. "It's a trident. Serafina's a siren. I'm a siren. *I'll* wield it."

His brows furrow. "Not a siren now, bit."

My insides turn to ice. How dare he! With a snarl, I shove the trident at his chest, and he staggers back.

Travers rolls his eyes. "Come on now. There's still time to decide who gets to be the martyr."

"And in the thick of battle, you won't know whose hands it might transfer to, so quit your bickering." Mavis shakes her head. "I swear. Like two siblings."

With his eyes suddenly black and his single fang gleaming, Draven whirls toward his mother and growls.

"Just cool your hot head, son." Travers thumps Draven on the back.

I ram Draven's shoulder with mine and storm toward the exit.

His whine follows me to the door. "Leira, come on. I'm just trying to get you to see that you'll be strutting around on two legs, and Serafina's gonna be gliding through the sea like it's nobody's business."

I whirl around. "I know that! I'm walking around, aren't I? I'm not staggering about like some idiot drunk on blood wine! I can fight her. I'm a freakin' warrior, Draven!"

With the trident still in one hand, he tries to grab my biceps, but a rap at the front door startles all of us.

Travers turns and opens it. "Yeah?"

Gravian is there, all vampy and huffing his breaths. "Prince Draven?"

"Yeah?" He saunters over to the door and gestures for Gravian to enter. "What's the sitch, mate?"

He speaks as his broad form fills the doorway. "I have an update on the queen. I've been to Soundless Shores. The last of her men have received her siren's kiss. They are mobile and swimming toward Lunaris."

My heart rate quickens. "We have to leave now! By the time we get to Lunaris, the battle could be over. I have to help Daddy and my sisters."

"How'd you zip there and back in a blink?" Draven turns the trident so that the three points spin. "That's a full day's trek. Even Regalith couldn't hoof it that fast."

"With this, my liege." He holds out a beefy wrist with a golden bracelet. The adornment is at least an inch wide, with a ring of silver rimming the center. "This cuff lets me shadow slide."

Travers tips up onto his toes and studies the cuff. Mavis comes around the dining table.

My eyes widen. "How does it work? What does it mean to shadow slide?"

"Moving like a ghost," Draven says. "A disembodied spirit."

"And with a disregard for time," Gravian adds.

"Where'd you snatch this from?" Suspicion fills Draven's tone.

"Stole it from a witch in Umbral Expanse, in the heart of the Black Forest."

Draven narrows his eyes. "What were you doing there, mate?"

"Best not to know, my prince." He works the cuff from his wrist and holds it out. "But you should use it. I understand time is of the essence."

Draven doesn't take it. "What's the deal? What's its price?"

Gravian's shoulders deflate. "It not only drains physical energy but also fragments memories or alters the user's perception of time."

Draven mutters a curse.

"But it hasn't had too much of an effect on me," Gravian says hurriedly.

"*Too* much?" Draven asks.

I eye him, wondering why he's not taking the proffered gift we so obviously need. So there are drawbacks. Everything on the forsaken land above the sea does.

Quickly, I grab it up. I have to get to Lunaris, and if Draven's not going to risk it, I will. "So that's why you were out of breath?" I turn the cuff over in my hands, studying what must be a magical inscription.

Gravian nods.

Draven swipes the cuff from my hand, and when I make a grab for it, he holds it over my head. "What's the deal with memories and time, mate? Is it one or the other, or both?" Draven pushes my hands away. "You're not gonna use it, love, not until we've got a handle on what's what."

Gravian eyes our childish struggle. "Yeah. Sometimes both. I nearly torched myself once because I forgot what my

daylight ring was for, and I took it off, thinking the sun in the sky was the moon."

"So disorientation. Lunacy. Right bloody fantastic."

"I'll make sure that doesn't happen," I say as I pull Draven's arm down and work to pry the cuff out of his hand. "No torched vampire. Got it. But we have to get to Lunaris, Draven. Now."

He snorts but surrenders it to me. "What did it do to you when you used it last?" he asks Gravian.

The vampire shrugs. "For a moment after arriving, there was this huge tumult like crashing waves, and I crouched, expecting to be swallowed up. Mostly because that was the last thing I heard before I slid through the shadows."

Draven growls.

I slide the cuff on. It's too big for a wrist like mine. Must have been made for a guy. "Will it transport two?"

If it doesn't, I'm leaving Draven behind.

"And a trident?" Draven asks.

"I'm not sure about another person, but it has always hauled all my gear." Gravian shifts as he gauges the trident with hungry eyes—as if he wants it.

Mavis joins our group near the door. "So Draven'll give Leira a pony-back ride. Problem solved."

"Pony-back ride?" I ask.

She pats Draven's mid back. "Give him the cuff, and hop on now. You won't break him. He's sturdy."

Travers snorts as I raise my brows and rotate the cuff on my wrist.

"Oi, Mum, are we sure about this? What if I get to Lunaris and I'm completely knackered and all hell's breaking loose? I'm not gonna let Leira go off solo while I'm having a kip."

"What if you forget who you are and think you're a cecaelia?" I say as I adjust the cuff. "Wah, wah. I'm going, Draven. Are you coming or not? Are we going to do this?" I hold my hand out for the trident.

Draven turns to me, his pupils flicking over my face as if he's memorizing every feature. As they come to stop on my questioning orbs, he slips the cuff off my wrist. His perfect lips form words I can't believe he's admitting to this entire room. "Just don't let me forget I've got a soft spot for you, yeah, bit?"

Chapter 29
Draven

The cuff fits too loosely. Gravian's got a bulky body that I'm no match for. "Mum, Da, make sure Rega knows I'm off. Tell him not to worry, yeah? He's out having a bite."

Mum nods and throws herself against my waist. "You've got this, my brave son. I'm so proud of you."

Da slugs my shoulder. "Don't let those fishie maidens dazzle ya too much that you can't fight, yeah?"

I snort before kissing Mum's forehead and prying her off. "It's not the fishie maidens I'm worried about." I wink at my sister. "Ready, Leira?"

She straightens and squares her shoulders. "Hold on to my sea mist for me, Mavis."

Mum nods.

"I'll head back to Soundless Shores and prepare for your return, my prince," Gravian says. "Suppose Regalith will let me catch a ride?"

I smirk. "If you ask nicely."

"Can you please tell Luciathan to return to Lunaris," Leira says, "that we will have need of him there. Tell him I'm sorry I kept him waiting."

Gravian looks puzzled.

"He's a leviathan," I say. "Great big beastie lurking about just offshore."

Though his brow rises, Gravian makes a short bow to Leira. "It would be my honor to relay the message."

I clear my throat. "So how do I power this bad boy up?" I indicate the cuff.

"Twist the silver inlay while picturing where you'll be traveling," Gravian says. "It has to be a place you know by sight."

"Not a problem, since I've been to Lunaris." I chuckle as I tap my shoulder, suggesting Leira should hop on.

A low growl from deep in her chest surfaces, but she doesn't waste a moment gripping both my shoulders and springing onto my back.

I adjust her weight with my one hand while clutching the trident with the other. Leira has a death grip on my neck, and I feel the press of her siren swells into my back and her talons grazing my shoulders.

"Oi, love. It's not as if I'm gonna toss you off. Let up a tad, yeah?" I gasp.

She hisses into my ear. "Do it now, prince."

I clutch the trident tight, the cuff weighing down my wrist, while I fiddle with the inlay. Bloomin' thing's sticking, feels as if there's grit jammed in there, but I force it. My eyes are shut tight as I try to picture the blasted throne room, then it hits me—bad idea. If Serafina's already holding court, we'll walk right into the mess and will end up skewered or worse.

I cast my mind along all the chaotic bits of the sea kingdom I've laid eyes on, and wouldn't you know it, I fixate on some pool near the palace. Next thing I know, this sickening tug hits my gut—and I've known I've shadow surfed right past the beach, the waves, and into the humid interior of Lunaris—

Especially when I plunge into a tepid pool and swallow a mouthful of water.

What in the blazes is going on? A tremendous weight presses down on me, strangling my neck, but the next moment, it lifts away with a stir of bubbles.

I propel myself to the surface and throw myself on the sand at the edge of a smooth pool. My hand is gripped around this three-pronged rod, but I let go as I cough the water from my lungs, feeling as if I'm half undead. "Bloody grand." I cough some more.

Beside me is the rattiest-looking two-legged siren I have ever seen. Her hair sticks to her inky scales and cheeks, and coats her like tacky seaweed.

I don't have time for another gasp of salty air. The little bird makes a grab for the pointy rod, attempting to slide it right from underneath me, but I'm faster and nab the handle and push the longest point against her heart.

The rod sparks to life, lighting up and vibrating as if it likes my rough treatment.

The siren slumps back but wraps her digits around the rod to hold it off. "Draven! It's Leira. Leira!"

I jam the point harder against her chest. "Oi, little fishie." I'm suddenly aware of the chaos around us. Siren's screaming. Vampires descending on them. Demons ripping arms off and scales out. "What's with the raging party, yeah? Not likin' the scene. This has mayhem written all over it, and I'm gonna gut you if you don't tell me what I'm doing here."

"Draven!" The tailless fishie coils her knees to her chest and rams me in the stomach with her feet.

I topple back and narrowly escape making a grand splash in the pool. "Did you put me under your screeching tune, bit?"

Leira flips to her feet, but stays low, like some feral creature. "Shut up and listen, you stupid prince."

With my chest heaving from exhaustion, I mirror her, keeping the rod pointed in her direction. "Talk fast, love. I don't fancy those sharp teeth and talons."

She rolls her eyes. "The cuff on your wrist. Gravian let you use it to shadow slide us here. We just left Travers and Mavis

at Castleroch. We're at Lunaris. We have to stop the Sea Witch. She brought her horde of thralled servants to attack my people."

I sway. "What's with my noggin'? Nothin's right."

"It won't be. Side effect from the cuff, but you can trust me. I'm your half-sister."

I rapidly blink my peepers at her. "Half-sister? Now who's off her gourd?"

"Look. You just have to trust me. You want to get rid of Serafina, right?"

Here's something that makes sense to my muddled noggin. "Yeah!"

"Okay. Then can you follow my lead?"

We both duck as a siren is catapulted past us and splashes into the pool. The poor bloke sputters to the surface, a gaping hole in his chest. "He ripped out my nexus scale," he gasps as he falls to his knees near us, his voice quaking as if he'll break down in sobs, his dull pink hair clinging to just around his chin.

Leira's quick to slide up beside him and support his trembling body. "Lindgal, have you seen the Sea Witch? Where is she?"

"Throne room. King Nereus and the witch have been brawling for some time."

Leira rises smoothly to her feet, and I'm so dazzled by her shiny scales that I don't catch that she's nabbed the rod from my hand until it's feistily glowing from her fishie talons and she's turned it on me. "We need to get to her. This trident is a sure weapon that can defeat her."

Lindgal shakes his head, pressing his palms over his weeping wound. "Too many ghouls invading the palace. And they have some sort of magic that slows us."

"Blood magic," I say. "The vamps are using blood magic. Freeze a fishie right in its tracks, it will."

Lindgal swallows. "And those horned beasts are ripping out our scales while we can't defend ourselves."

"Listen," Leira says. "Get to another siren who has her nexus scale. Find someone who can give you a siren's kiss. I have a plan to knock these beasts out."

Lindgal nods.

"Tell everyone who has lost their scale. Please. Get everyone to the coral caves."

Lindgal nods as he chokes back a sob. For a spry-looking bloke, he sure has descended into a useless quivering mass awfully quickly. I do wonder about his shade of pink. All his meek, girlie hues make me think he's not leading a troop of fishies into battle.

I haul the fish folk to his feet, and he scurries off, dodging wailing combatants.

"What's your plan, little bird?" I ask.

"We're going to give my people the advantage."

"How so?"

"By flooding Lunaris so they can shift into their fins. Your people will lose their agility."

"Right." I shuffle and shake my shoulders, trying to relieve the tension. "Sounds easy enough. How do we take down the cage around this joint?"

"There's a cavern beneath the center of Lunaris that holds the essence from thousands upon thousands of nexus scales from those who have passed on. It's some magical pulsating orb."

"The essence, yeah? That powers this joint?"

Leira bobs her head. "We destroy the orb, then Lunaris will flood, and the vampires and demons will drown."

Hold on. I'm not liking this one bit. "And that will leave just the queen beastie?"

"Yes." Leira glares at me. "Are you sure you're up for this? Your brain isn't too broken?"

I see a greasy purple ghaleiden demon barreling down on Leira, coming up fast on her rear. "Hold that thought, love." I lunge past her and punch the beastie in the mug. "Oi, mate!" I posture threateningly before him. "Take your battle elsewhere."

As he staggers back, Leira pivots and points the trident at his heart. "Run along now."

The ghaleiden demon growls, and Leira shoves the point hard enough against him to draw blood.

"I don't want to kill you," she shouts, "but I will!"

I jump up and nab the demon by his horns and haul his oily carcass back. "You heard the scrappy siren. Bug off!" I shove him, and he lands on his rear and then twists to scramble away. "Not too brave, those ghallie demons. Doesn't take much to scare them off." I brush my hands together and turn back to Leira. "So lead the way, Your Fishiness."

Leira sighs. "You really have no idea who I am? The shadow cuff cleared all that out of your thick head?"

I shrug. "You seem familiar, like a bad stomachache I can't shake. An itch I can't scratch. A bump I can't smooth—"

"Okay! I get it. You definitely get that I irritate you to the ends of the abyss and back." She grabs my hand and tugs me after her, muttering, "I can't believe you thought you were in love with me."

"What's that, bit? I'm in love with you?"

"Not at all, Draven. Not at all. It was an inconsequential delusion, and the cuff fixed it."

“Aren’t you my half-sister, yeah? Why would I be in love with you?”

“Exactly.”

We move into the shadows amidst the clatter and screams around us. I’m feeling as if I’m suffocating, trapped leagues under the sea, with the drip of the water, the way the muffled sounds echo, the choking humidity—

The clammy talons threaded with mine.

In love with her?

I eye her shiny scales dotting her backside. The gnarled locks she pays zero attention to. The way her muscles tense as she pulls me down to crouch and listen.

I’m too much in my head to even pay attention to the chaos around us, but I gotta get into the game. I may have been knocked down a peg or too, but I can’t let this fishie maiden down.

Not when it looks as if my life depends upon it as much as hers.

Not when it looks as if I have to free my crew.

My crew.

Not Leira’s.

Mine.

Leira’s studying an alley, waiting for an opening. While she’s distracted, I slip my hand from hers. I rest it on her shoulder as if I’m all supportive and whatnot, while my other hand goes for the trident.

My move is swift. In one second, I have her pushed against the wall and the trident yanked from her grip. As I press my forearm across her sternum, pinning her, I say, “Oi, Leira. We can’t flood Lunaris. I won’t let you. I’m not gonna let my crew die.”

“Draven,” she hisses. “Are you insane? The vampires will live!”

“The demon beasties won’t! And you’re forgetting, princess, dying’s not exactly like singing from the mountain tops. It’s painful as all get out.”

She scowls. “Can you think of a better way?”

“The way it see it, love, my crew aren’t so much killing yours as ripping out their bright, shiny scales, the ones they use to steal demon beastie powers, am I right? They’re doing me a favor by ripping out every last one of those vile scales.”

“Have you gone insane? You rip out our scales and we can’t shift! We can’t breathe water!”

“Oh, and we can? You better not flood Lunaris, bit, ’cause I gotta choose a side. It’s my crew over yours.”

“I hate you, Draven! I should have known I could never trust you!”

Snarling, Leira makes a swipe at me with her talons, but I see those pointy daggers coming. With the trident, I clock her on the noggin just as her talons sink into my chest. Her eyelids flutter before she goes limp, and her talons pull from my skin, leaving five bloody marks.

I catch her against me.

“Sorry, love. Gonna pull rank here, seeing as I’m your half-brother and all, and obviously older.” I lay her gingerly on the ground. We’re tucked into a dark corner, so she should be safe.

For a moment I hesitate as I gaze into her face and brush her hair off her cheeks, wondering how she could claim I could ever be in love with her.

Chapter 30
Draven

With swift strides, I'm vaulting over weeping, useless sirens stupefied over lost scales. The demon and vamp beasties are rounding them up, throwing shackles around their spindly wrists and ineffective legs.

My crew are all thralled to Serafina. No matter how much I call for their aid, they ignore me and continue as her brainless puppets.

Some sirens lie there lifeless, puddles of red around them leaching into the sand and saltwater pools. Still, their magic scales hum away, tethered to their sorry carcasses. The magic doesn't give a care about its vessel, apparently.

I reckon these brave fishies fought tooth and nail, refusing to surrender, so they bit the big one rather than let their stolen mojo get snatched away.

As much as I loathe their way of life of grifting powers and killing my crew, the loss of these sea folk is regrettable, and I'm thinking of how I would feel if the little siren who proclaims she's my sister were lying in their places.

I can't say I'm thrilled about it. But somethin' nags at me, makes me wonder how much I'd give a damn even though I can't quite pin down our connection.

Stupid cuff! I spare it a glare as I slip through the palace's open doors. Demons and sirens are dukin' it out, so there's no one to stop me, no one to question the glowing trident I'm toting.

Within the palace, the battle rages. I weave through the fray, knocking out a few creeps to give the sirens a breather. I'm not keen on my kin droppin' dead, but a couple of snoozin' fiends oughta balance the scales.

I get to the throne room with its vaulted ceiling and echoing atmosphere. The room's a right wicked mess, as if some sea god went on a bender, smashing runes, wrecking coral, and turning the hell pool into a muddy mess.

Serafina's throwing down with King Nereus, and their lackeys are circling, itching for a piece of the action.

Amidst the thunderous clash of egos, I slink through the shadows, aiming to get close enough without tipping off the witch queen.

Serafina locks eyes with the king, her gaze shimmering with malevolent intent. Sweat runs in rivers down both their brows.

Whoa. Pure hatred these guys are sporting. I'd never suspect they were once an item.

"Nereus," Serafina purrs as they circle each other. "You underestimated my abilities. My how fatigued you have become."

His coppery scales blind me as the light catches 'em. The Sea King's got this wicked sneer pinching his face, as if he's about to tear into someone's jugular like a vampire. "You wield power from a stolen nexus scale. You will die for violating our daughter, Serafina."

Funny he should mention Leira's stolen power and not the demons who died to give it up!

Serafina strokes the scale embedded in her chest. "*My* daughter. She has never been yours. You stole her from *me*."

With a flick of her hand, she summons forth dark tendrils of energy, burping them from her appendages as if she's an inky cecaelia, coiling them around her foe with the deceptive grace of an octopus ensnaring its prey. I've seen this fancy maneuver before. It's not pretty.

I spot my opening while the room is drowning in shadows. Their minions are gobsmacked.

The Sea King, caught off guard by the witchy mojo, squirms against the spectral bonds squeezing him, though his royal aura still gleams in the murk, a testament to his power and authority over this ocean realm.

With a malicious grin twisting her lips, the Sea Witch closes in, her movements sinuous and predatory, her scales blood red and repulsive. She whispers silky incantations, spinning a spell that's bound to tear the Sea King asunder.

With my trusty trident raised, I creep forward, cloaked in the ink of her hex.

As the big shot king wrestles with the creeping enchantments, bam! A flash of blinding light bursts from his chest, illuminating the shadowy room with an eerie glow. His old magic core, throbbing like crazy, sticks out like a sore thumb in the mayhem.

A final shot maybe? I mean, what was that? But it's a swing and a miss.

The Sea Witch extends her hand, fingers outstretched, talons poised. That's my cue to dive in and jab with my trident.

"Draven!" Serafina suddenly exclaims. I'm snarled up in a new tendril of dark mist, my wrist with the trident immobilized and pinned above my head. Fantastic. "What have you brought me?"

Her black magic mojo yanks the trident from my grip.

"Oh, you've brought me a gift! You are always ever so thoughtful." The trident floats over to her, and she takes it with both hands as if she's ready to bring the place down.

The Sea King groans as his chest swells, trying to pop his bindings. "Prince Draven, what are you doing here?"

"Just fancied another holiday, ya know? Another trip to the miserable void of this sea."

“Leira?” His question is spoken in earnest.

“She’s safe, Your Fishiness. Don’t gotta worry about her.”

“Oh, Nereus.” Serafina takes his jaw with one of her talons. “Draven has been most attentive to his sister.” Her words are slippery, full of suggestion. “He has given her the greatest care. His affections are to be commended.”

“Sister?” King Nereus lets out this booming laugh. “You think they’re siblings? Serafina, you poor deluded sea urchin.” He continues his wild cackle. “I guess I really fooled you, didn’t I? And then exiled you, back to a lover who would never have you, believing you lost him his child, and worse, believing he never cared for her.”

This bit of rambling catches my attention. What’s the Sea King getting at?

With a hiss, Serafina points the trident at his nexus scale. “He never wished for a daughter. Leira was no loss to him.”

Mirth shines in King Nereus’s eyes. “What I find quite amusing is that he never told you. That he would live with the lie just to spite you.”

“What lie?” Serafina asks with a curious, high-pitched lilt, as if she’s trying to hide her ire.

“Asmodear never lay with you, never fathered a daughter. I came to you that night, in a glamour as Asmodear, to prove to myself that you would truly betray me by giving yourself to another. Asmodear caught my retreat, after our deed was finished. He confessed he already disdained you, and everything you stood for. That he could never truly love you.”

This is information I savor.

Serafina’s brows rise. Her face reddens. “You conspired against me?” Her voice is tight.

King Nereus’s lips twist up into a sinister grin. “Yes. From that moment on, we were united in your undoing. With pleasure, he kept you dangling like a worm on a hook.”

My noggin tilts back, and I burst into laughter, loud and hearty. “You daft witch, Serafina. You’re in for a world of hurt, for offing my old man, for double-crossing not one but two monarchs.”

With a primal howl that echoes through this undersea kingdom, she wrenches the trident back.

The obsidian point slices under the nexus scale on the Sea King’s chest, and with a flick of the witch’s wrist, she pops that bad boy right off.

It goes flying, blood splattering across the fancy décor and peppering Serafina’s scales.

She crows as the Sea King’s bindings split and he staggers, crumbling to his knees.

His scale clatters to the ground, a good distance out of reach.

The Sea King lifts his chest. “Do it quickly, Serafina. Have your revenge. Strike me down!”

She wastes no time. The trident hits the king’s chest, right over his heart.

But doesn’t sink into his flesh.

The strike rebounds, blowing the Sea Witch and the king apart. They both land with a hard crack.

The witch looks singed, smoke rising from the ends of her hair.

Boom! My restraints give out. I dive for the king, yelling at Nereus to get moving. As I help the old fish to his feet, I holler, “The trident is keyed to me and Leira, the fatal blow meant only for Serafina.”

“That’s mighty convenient,” he gasps. “Might have been nice to know that before I resigned myself to an end.”

Knowing we gotta regroup, I grab his arm and pull him away. “And miss the show, Your Highness? Not on your life.”

Queen beastie is rising, pulsating, her siren song swelling behind us like a twisted orchestra. I scream to drown out the tune invading my noggin as I race with the Sea King and my vamp speed away from her hearing.

We gotta leave his crew behind. There’s no help for them just now.

Once clear of the joint, I make a beeline to where I stashed Leira. “Your spawn had this genius notion to flood the place, give you fishies with tails the upper hand against these beasties. Bright idea, huh?”

“It might be a good idea, but too many sirens have lost their scales. They would drown.”

“Leira told them to get help, to find a siren to kiss them and head to the coral caves.”

The Sea King nods as he presses his palm over his chest wound. “Good.”

The joint is noticeably quiet as vamps and demons stream with their prisoners toward the palace. The number of sirens are few, so I’m banking that a large number of them got away. They can reorganize for an underwater sea attack.

I despise myself for thinking this.

I’m resigned to the awful truth. I’m stuck watching my own kind go down the drain until I deal with Serafina, but they’re not really mine as long as she’s calling the shots.

I think of T-man, and I boil inside, trying not to shoot daggers at the pompous king next to me.

We’re walking with quick strides, but Nereus is lagging. Blood streams down his chest, but he’s a bit too cocky to admit he’s in pain.

Just like Leira—his daughter.

This should mean something more to me, I suspect, since we’re not actually related, but I can’t make my brain work out the significance.

We hit the alley where I left Leira.

She's gone.

I swear.

"What is it, Prince Draven?" King Nereus asks.

"She's not here."

"Not here? Who?"

"Leira," I say. "I stashed her here."

"Stashed? This is your idea of safe?"

I reel back, puffing my chest. "Yeah! If she's away from Serafina, no doubt."

"She'll be heading to the luminous cavern, then, to flood the place."

I grab his arm as he pivots on his heel. "When this gig is up, we're going to have words, yeah? I help you save your crew, you promise to keep your mitts off mine from here on out."

Nereus narrows his eyes, towering like a titan. If his scale hadn't been torn from him, he could crush me. "Fine. You have my word."

"Good. We gotta get to Leira. She doesn't have any mojo in her scale. If the place floods, she'll go down with it."

"I'll take care of it. You needn't fear for her." His eyes, dark as midnight, flash at me. "You see about getting that trident from her majesty, and we'll rejoin you."

"Exactly what I intended." I crack my knuckles. "Shouldn't be too hard. She'll be crowing on the throne. Distracted by her own triumph. She's already calling her cronies in for her next command."

"You know why you aren't thralled by her, right?"

This has me balking. "Not sure about right now, but I've felt Serafina's screeching call. She's had me buckling and bending."

"But you're not following her *now*."

I shrug. "Just wasn't in the right place at the time for her to work her mojo on me." Even as I say this, it doesn't seem right. I've been around her plenty when she was screechin' her horrid tune.

"She may be able to hurt you with her song, command you even for a short while, but she could never hold you for long."

My ears perk up. "Oh, and why's that?"

"Leira got to you first." The Sea King pushes on my forehead with two fingers. "Her thrall is still in there even if she doesn't have her nexus scale. It's wrapped in your mind. You'll hear it like an annoying buzz in your head forever more."

I scoff. "I knew it! There's no way I could love her."

"Love her? You've known her for three days. It's the thrall."

My face stings, and reality hits me, not just 'cause Leira spilled the beans, but 'cause I can feel it. Bits are coming back to me.

I've kissed her. Thought I loved her.

I shiver from self-loathing. I was a right royal prick to her.

But the thrall. Blast.

I clench my fist, itching to sock this pompous king right in the kisser.

"Easy, prince. Let's work this all out when this is over, like two civilized sovereigns."

"Fine," I grouse.

"Not that I should care for such an inept prince, but what are you going to do once the water starts coming in? You'll drown."

I scoff. "Me? What about you? You'll drown."

"I'm a siren. I have contingencies, but you are an insignificant vampire."

I harrumph. "You didn't know I would reanimate."

He chuckles. "Perhaps I did know you would, only to drown again." He winks.

Bloody king bastard!

"Find a siren to kiss you," he says. "I would but…" He gestures to the gaping hole in his chest.

I laugh, hardly believing the Sea King offered to lock lips with me if he could. Now I can't shake the image of his fish lips coming at me. "Yeah, I'm sure there are dozens willing. I'll get right on that."

Chapter 31
Leira

How do I destroy this thing?

I stare at the pulsing orb in the echoing cavern beneath Lunaris. The power cell is bigger than I am and glittering with colors swirling and turning in on themselves. The heat coming off it is monstrous. I suppose it's what magically keeps this place so temperate even while we are leagues under the sea.

Beyond the orb, water runs upward from fissures in the ground to the Abyssal Vortex, feeding the magic of the pool that harvests demon power. They are both connected—the Lunaris Orb. The Abyssal Vortex. They have given my people new life as striders and given us our stationary home beneath the sea instead of the life of predatory nomads.

I rub the throbbing pain in my skull, irked that Draven would knock me out and take the trident. I suppose I can't blame him. The shadow slide totally scrambled his head.

Even if it hadn't, I still think he would have betrayed me and used the trident for his own gains. I growl over my frustration. I can't trust him. Even now.

I turn my attention back to the orb. I haven't the faintest idea what to do.

Think, Leira!

I managed to sneak past demons and vamps brutally battling it out under the sea dome. I've never seen my home filled with such violence and chaos. Despite the deaths of my fallen kindred, I was happy to see countless others escaping Lunaris together, either because of a shift to their fins or because they were siren-kissed. With them safe, I just have to flush the monsters out of Lunaris.

But how do I destroy the massive power cell under the city to crumble the aqua veil?

"Leira!"

I whirl to find a coppery siren staggering toward me. Usually majestic and intimidating with all his warrior ink, this siren is battered and bruised. "Daddy!"

His muscled chest is bleeding. There's a gaping hole in his sternum.

I pull him into my arms. "Oh, Daddy. You're hurt. Serafina took your scale."

He winces at the mention of her name. "It will grow back. I am not concerned for myself, only for our people. Even now, the Sea Witch has captured the palace and has taken into custody those who remain."

"Are we too late?"

"No. Never too late, my dear." Daddy straightens back to smile down at me.

I blow out a huff of air. "What are we to do? Is the situation hopeless?"

"There is still much we can do, but you must restore your nexus scale first."

"How?" I ask.

"Plunge your hands into the Lunaris Orb. It will reconnect you with the sea and the Abyssal Vortex."

"That's all I have to do to fix my scale?"

"Yes," he says.

"Will it hurt?"

"It will know you and respond accordingly. Should be as harmless as a lukewarm current."

"But will the power within the Lunaris Orb have the harvested demon powers?" I ask. "Those fade over time, which is why we harvest yearly, and the power imbued in the Lunaris Orb is taken from old nexus scales. What will it be able to give me?"

"You will not receive the powers from the harvest, but the power of our people. The ability to sing, to shift, the transmission of thoughts to aquatic life, echo sound…"

"If those are our powers, and always within our grasp, then why do we take from the demons?"

"We have grown greedy. I sought to take too much."

I grip Daddy's thick wrist, stunned by how limp and weak it feels. "Can we not be enough as sirens? As our ancestors?"

"Prince Draven would wish we were. I will think on it, Leira. But for now, we must restore you, and return the kingdom to the might of the sirens, and rid it of this sea witch and her riffraff."

I nod.

He takes my hands and pulls me toward the orb. As he braces me in his arms and stretches my palms forward with such love and tenderness, I grow certain he is my father. I know it.

He has to be.

I cannot be Draven's sister.

The heat from the orb has dried out my hide. I itch and thirst for a dip into the ocean, but that will come soon enough as the sea returns Lunaris to its former watery humble beginnings. As my hands sink into the orb, warmth courses up my arms,

and I begin to feel great peace and love and wholeness lift through me.

This will not be the last of Lunaris. Of my people, of our way of life.

The deadened scale in the center of my chest vibrates with energy. The illumination suddenly coming from it competes with the might of the roiling orb before me and Daddy.

I gasp from a surge of power as Daddy pulls me free. He turns me in his arms and smiles down at me, presses three fingertips to the scale on my sternum. “I have always been so proud of you, Leira, my youngest, my most precious gift.”

Does he call me a gift because I am not his own?

With big, questioning eyes, I look up at him and see nothing but love and kindness in his eyes, and perhaps sadness. “Daddy?”

“I was not upset with you for bringing a vampire to the harvest. That was my mistake in thinking you were ready to join your sisters.”

Feeling shame, I begin my retort. “Daddy—”

He holds a palm up. “You erred because I did not prepare you enough. That was my failure, not yours. I could not have expected you to know the difference between a vampire and demon on sight, let alone that he was a prince, and that I would have preferred you have no dealings with the sovereigns on the shore.”

“No dealings?”

“Had I told you the truth about Serafina, you would have sought her out. Had I expressly forbidden dealings with the royals, you would have been curious. I suppose my confidence in your elder sisters to only harvest demons made me too hasty with you.”

“I’m sorry I let you down.”

“Daughter, are you not listening? You have not let me down. Besides, I should have made it clear that I would always love you no matter what. Always. The morning after the harvest, I was heartbroken to discover you were missing. I feared all the more when I discovered you were ashore.”

“I shouldn’t have run off. Then none of this would be happening.”

“Do not blame yourself. Serafina would have found a way whether she had your nexus scale or not. I only wish you had not suffered because of her.” He meekly grins. “It seems, though, that Prince Draven has been watching over you.”

I grimace. “Yeah. Sort of. He’s an annoyance I will be glad to be rid of.”

Daddy’s expression shifts to one that could be astonishment. “Really?”

I can’t have him prying here. What would he do if he knew Draven and I had been kissing, and not because I was giving him a siren’s kiss? Even worse if he knew we were possibly brother and sister. So I attempt to change the subject. “Mother —”

“I regret not telling you about Serafina. I should have. The wound was too great then. I will never keep secrets from you again.”

I nod, feeling unexpected emotion well in my chest.

Daddy ruffles my snarled locks. “Shall we flood Lunaris? Take these monsters down a notch? Show them just how we sirens do things under the sea?”

I nod enthusiastically. “How do we destroy the Lunaris Orb?”

“I believe we only need to weaken it. If we were to destroy it, the weight of the ocean would crush us. Weakening it will allow the waters to rush in like a tide, not an avalanche.”

“Okay,” I say with understanding.

Daddy looks into my eyes and sweeps an errant strand from my cheek. “I’ll take care of the orb. You should go. Prince Draven will have need of your aid in wrestling the trident from the Sea Witch.”

I smack my forehead. “He lost the trident to her! Idiot prince!”

“Do not be too hard on him. Despite my dislike for his undead stench and pompous aura, he’s noble to the core. He will rule well after Serafina’s demise.”

He urges me from the room. “Go now. The sirens will rally with the influx of water into the kingdom. They will know what to do.”

My brow contorts. “You’ll still be able to lead them, to get to them without your scale?”

“Yes, daughter.”

I study the spray of runic symbols across Daddy’s forehead. Someday I will have my own.

“You needn’t worry,” he says. “I’ll find someone to give me a siren’s kiss.”

I frown but nod. I would give him a kiss now if I had water to force into his lungs.

“Now go. That’s an order, Leira. I love you. And keep that idiot prince from drowning again. I’m sure he’ll appreciate that.”

I smirk. “Is that an order too, Daddy?”

“I’ll leave that last bit up to your interpretation.”

Chapter 32
Leira

"Serafina," I hear Draven muttering with docile words from where I hide behind the throng of demons and vampires. They morosely sway in place like sea reeds fluttering on a current.

She's sirened them beyond sense. This helps me stay hidden. They probably wouldn't know to alert Serafina of my presence unless she gave them a specific command.

Good.

My shackled kin are lined up along the perimeter, silent and scowling, their expressions declaring their outrage that this exiled sea witch would dare defy their king. Some of the sirens aren't warriors and weep as blood runs freely from their sternal wounds, but a few of them are battle hardened, and defiantly stand with their shoulders broad, ignoring the blood dripping between their feet.

Every so often, a vampire's tongue flicks out to lick his lips, runs over the points of his fangs. The smell of blood has them salivating.

Draven is bowed before the Sea Witch's vastly inflated ego on my daddy's throne. Her triumph has inflated her aura. She's currently sitting in her two legs, her back ramrod straight, caressing the trident in her grasp.

"The trident is a gift," Draven says to the sandy stone floor.

His words are so syrupy I could vomit.

Gift? How can he say this after what he gave to forge it? I'm going to wring Draven's neck.

Serafina strokes the prong of the obsidian shard and speaks with her shrill, curious but deceptive, tone. "If I'm not mistaken, dear stepson, I believe this trident has a certain preference for you. Does it not?"

Draven bows his head. "You did not imagine it, Your Majesty."

"Why is that, might you think? And be careful with your words, Draven. I would be delighted to welcome you back to Soundless Shores should you prove to be the obedient stepson you've always been."

I tighten my talons into fists. What he says could change everything.

Whether or not I'll kill him.

"Your Witchiness, I stumbled upon the trident in the armory. Don't ask me why it's all cozied up to me and whatnot. Maybe it senses the boss vibes radiating off me, yeah?"

"Mmm. Perhaps." Her thoughtfulness is clearly an act.

She rises in her might, her supple muscles rippling smoothly, her gleaming red locks curling around her shoulders like tentacles. Her body has been adorned with jewels from our own treasury; some minion must have been tasked with scavenging them. A crown I know belongs to the former queen rests on her head.

Her once crown, I suppose.

I restrain a mad laugh. This is lunacy. My mother, sitting where my father should be.

Serafina lifts Draven with her invisible magic, causing my heart to race. She's held me too many times like that. I know exactly how much it hurts, how much it chokes the breath from a body.

Draven gasps. His body hangs limply. I'm tense, fighting the urge to dart out—

Especially when she pushes the point of the obsidian under his lip to expose his gums.

"Draven! Where's your fang? What has happened to you?" Her tone indicates her surprise, hints at compassion I know is false.

He can do nothing but groan a weak breath.

Serafina drops him like an anchor. He crumples into the sand while Serafina whirls away, her hips waving. "Do not think to deceive me, Draven!"

He gasps while gripping his throat. "I would never dream of it, Your Fishiness."

"Those meddlesome foster parents of yours are too skilled. I see my pets failed to dispatch them, and in your scheming, you thought to give your own fang to craft this!" Brandishing the trident, she spins to face the room. "So selfless! So noble!" She crouches and jabs the obsidian shard under his throat, forcing his chin up. "I see exile was too generous." Her plain words are hard, the abhorrence in her eyes evident. As she stands, she jerks the trident away, leaving behind beads of crimson from a cut across his jaw. "You are sentenced to death. When the sun rises, you shall warmly greet it." She waves a dismissive hand. "Take him away!"

Before her thralled minions can scoop the prince up, a low rumble sweeps through the palace.

I brace myself against a vibrating column.

The entire structure fiercely quakes as the air rumbles.

"What is this now?" Serafina shrieks.

The doors of the throne room buckle. First a drip like a leaky spigot begins, and then a cascade runs from the ceiling that

soars so near the aqua veil. The protective dome must be crumbling, and quickly too if the sea pounds against the door and has found its way into gaps in the ceiling.

Murmurs from the chaos stir the thralled men, the uncertainty of the situation loosening some of them from her control.

In the center of the throne room, the Abyssal Vortex bubbles up and escapes over its edge; its spill of water coming from the luminous cavern below.

The lowest point of the kingdom must already be full of water.

Lunaris is flooding. Daddy has done it.

"Guards!" Serafina shouts. "Guards!"

I blow out a steady breath as the guards scramble to brace the doors. It's only a matter of time before we take Lunaris back.

Serafina mumbles some incantation, and I wonder if it's to fortify the entrance.

She's too late. Much too late. Especially if the doors are buckling from the outside.

The doors explode open with a roar of water that bowls back the vampires and demons. Serafina shouts at her men to return to her, no doubt to give them a hasty siren kiss.

Ineffective. Impossible. She'll have no time.

As the water sweeps up to my waist, I wade toward my imprisoned siren kin. Not a scale between them, so I will have to move fast.

Draven reacts quickly, wading through the swell of current toward Serafina, past men who are responding to the disorder, not her command. I don't know what he thinks he can do, but when her lips part to start into a siren song, he punches her square in the mouth.

She staggers backward, and Draven's on her as she submerges into the rising water. He holds her down as he wrestles the trident from her grasp.

The water has already started my shift. My fingers have become webbed. Scales sprout. I silently thank the Lunaris Orb for restoring my nexus scale. Hurriedly, I gulp the water, introducing the shift in my lungs as my legs simultaneously fuse.

I have been restored. Relief settles over me even as urgency to act propels me.

Though my kin don't have their nexus scales, I won't let them drown. They are still shackled but will be able to swim to safety just fine.

With agile flicks of my tail, I converge on my kin and, with our faces in the water, kiss the first one I meet and force the coveted seawater into his lungs. We start a chain reaction I allow the others to carry on as I shout instructions to them to rally with the other sirens in the caves.

I've lost sight of Draven, but then his head pops above the water with a huge gasp of breath.

And the trident with it.

"Leira! Leira!" He spins around looking for me, waving the trident.

A rush of heat blooms in my chest; he somehow knew I was here. Had he glimpsed me? Figured I would come to the throne room?

"Here, Draven! Here!" I swim over to him.

"I've lost Serafina! Dammit, she got away!" He pushes his sopping locks off his forehead. "Skulking in the depths somewhere. Jettisoned some ink as she shifted."

"Ink?"

He blinks the water out of his eyes and pulls a hand down his face. "Yeah, like a beastly squid. I wounded her though. Nicked her scale. Think it's holding on by a thread."

The water around us darkens as it pushes us ever closer to the ceiling. I lift a hand coated in dark blue. Ink. Gross. Can't soak this into my lungs. "Camouflage!" I yell. "The influx of water should clear it soon."

He makes a face. "Yeah, right disgusting. I am not interested in knowing how she leaked it."

"A spell, Draven. She's not a cecaelia."

"Could have fooled me!"

Several supernaturals surface, only to gasp lungfuls of air and dive back under. They might make it out of the palace if they can fight the tide rushing in, but if the dome outside is almost flooded, they won't get much farther. We are deep beneath the sea. They'll surely drown.

Still fettered, my kin dive after them. I grab the nearest one. "Help the vampires and demons to the surface. They'll drown."

He bares his teeth and hisses. "I say leave them to their fate, princess." He dives under the water.

"Hey!" Draven shouts. "Thanks a bunch, fish face. I wouldn't let you drown!"

We've begun circling in a steady current that's shaped like a funnel. I shout over the roar of water. "The Abyssal Vortex must be influencing the surge coming in! We have to get out of here before it sucks us under!"

Draven grips my wrist. His brown eyes have gone black. He hisses his words past a single fang. "My crew, they're going

to die, Leira. The tide's rising faster than a bloody hurricane blowing in. They're as good as dead if we don't do somethin'!"

"I won't let that happen. If my people won't help them, I know who will."

With my nexus scale, I send a wave of telepathy out, searching. *Luciathan! Luciathan!*

I get a mental bellow in return.

"He's near!"

"Who!" Draven's weakening from treading water in the spinning torrent.

I grab the trident between us to steady him and steer us with my tail. "Luciathan!" *Luciathan, call your brethren. Scoop up as many adversaries as you can find and take them to the surface. For Draven. To save his people from drowning.*

I receive an answering bellow.

Thank you, old friend.

"I've tasked Luciathan and his brethren with finding them," I scream over the ruckus. "They'll collect them and get them to the surface."

Draven grabs my chin and plants a kiss on my lips. I'm so shocked, I gasp and tear my mouth away.

"Thank you, Leira." He flashes his lopsided holey grin, and something inside me dies from relief. "Thank you."

I paw at his cheek. "Do you remember me now, brother?"

He shakes his head. "Does it matter? Looks like we're in this together. I'm gonna trust you."

I groan. "Now you say that, after knocking me out cold."

"I'm sorry, bit. Thought it was something I had to do, but now I see I can't manage this without your stubborn, scaly hide."

I chuckle. "That's right. You need me, Draven. Can't survive without me."

We're spinning fast now. I can barely hold on to the trident to secure Draven.

"Speaking of survival, bit, we gotta do something about this!"

"I have to kiss you! Before you lose the rest of the air."

We each have a hand on the trident between us. Draven draws us close with a hand around my waist. I brace his cheek and, with a swish of my tail, drag him below the surface.

The throne room has descended into darkness, a solemn watery grave. Half a dozen lifeless sirens and foes spin in the cyclone with us, drawing ever closer to the Abyssal Vortex. The little light there is comes from my nexus scale and the trident. The ink from Serafina's escape has been diluted from the fresh water rolling in, but still, I shudder.

Lunaris as a waterlogged city is not my home. I feel as if time has rolled back centuries.

I look into Draven's eyes. The emotion behind them tells me he feels the dread of the darkening depths.

Lunaris will shine with light again.

A bubble with a terrified word rises from Draven's mouth. "Leira!"

I grip the back of his head with my talons, sinking them into his locks, trying to keep us together. *I won't let you drown!*

Let's have that kiss then, love.

With a hand on the trident and the other steering him, my mouth descends over his. Our lips just make contact when a high-pitched bellow blasts me and Draven.

I screech and recoil, barely keeping my hand clamped over the trident. The shriek comes again, rebounding through the water.

Echo sound.

Serafina.

Draven's suddenly limp, his ears bleeding. They're not made for loud underwater vibrations. Not made for the call sirens used for navigation.

And attack.

His hands float away from the trident, releasing my waist. I make a desperate grab for his shirt, but another blast blows us apart.

No! My hands grasp at shadows as he's torn from me. *Draven!*

I whip my tail around, struggling to find him, to connect with his drifting body. My siren vision is meager and useless with the swirl of water and bubbles obscuring it.

I locate the trident instead, and my grip illuminates my surroundings.

Draven!

I've lost him.

I frantically press my way through the funnel. I spot him too far from me, tumbling into the Abyssal Vortex.

No!

I dive after him, right down the center of the spiral, and plunge into the luminous cavern below.

Now that the place is flooded, I understand the meaning of the name. The cave glows with soft aquatic plants that have been awakened by the flood.

Bodies float around me. Sirens and demons and vampires who did not make it out. I frantically push them off, looking for

the platinum locks of my vampire.

Draven, where are you?

Leira… darling… a chilling voice purrs.

I spin about, my hair floating around me like a puffy land skirt.

Leira…

I squint through the murk. *Serafina? Show yourself!*

It seems you've lost something.

Draven? You took him! I swim toward the sound of her voice, the trident aimed and ready. *Where are you? Show yourself.*

My eyes are peeled for the Sea Witch and Draven.

He's probably already drowned, yet again.

I wince. He's going to kill me.

Down here the cavern is full, the water still—

Until a torrent of bubbles is stirred from a wide path of movement that spirals around me.

I whirl to follow the trail. *Serafina!*

What have you lost? she coos.

Give him back to me!

Him? Which him?

Which him? I ask. *Who else do you have?*

Serafina cackles. *Daddy dearest.*

Chapter 33
Leira

The Sea Witch flits into view, dark red tentacles whirling in an arc instead of a tail fin waving. Her lower body is enormous and swollen, no longer the lithe shape of a siren.

I narrow my eyes. *I don't understand. You're not a cecaelia.*

Didn't you know, princess? Her voice slithers through my mind. *The final stolen demon power. From a cecaelia demon. They take form on land or sea, imitating our cecaelia brethren.*

My mouth gapes open. *That's nauseating.*

I find extra appendages rather convenient, wouldn't you agree, dear? A single tentacle slips under my jaw, turning my face before slapping it away.

I ignore the sting. *No.*

The Sea Witch whirls her eight extra appendages through the water, continuing her incessant taunts. *Imagine my surprise when I descended and found daddy dearest floating belly up.*

Huh? Belly up? *Daddy?* I start toward her, my trident aimed at her chest, my eyes searching the watery tome for the Sea King. *What did you do to him? Where is he?*

Me? What did he do to himself? The only way to weaken the Lunaris Orb was to take the power into his own body, and without a nexus scale to contain the influx, the power was too much for his physical form. Her tone grows sappy with faux compassion. *I'm afraid he succumbed.*

Succumbed? Why didn't he tell me this? I could have done it!

The Sea Witch waves a hand. *You needn't fear. I gave him a big juicy siren's kiss just in time. He's unconscious, but alive.*

You saved him?

To grant him the courtesy he once bestowed me. To live out his days in exile on the dry land. The Sea Witch glides past the corpses, toward the bottom of the cavern, and swishes past what remains of the misshapen Lunaris Orb. The lopsided orb scarcely pulses, seems barely alive, if I ever could have called it alive, but it does give off a meek glow.

So it still contains some power.

The thought of our people reverting to mindless predatory fish folk skimming through the depths like sharks because we no longer have the advances our nexus scales bring makes me shiver.

No. Lunaris will rise again. With what little power is left, my people can restore their scales.

The Sea Witch slips past two familiar bodies floating just above the rough cavern floor.

Daddy! Draven!

I swim forward, but the Sea Witch pushes me back with a tentacle. *They're mine,* she growls with a deep voice.

I jab the trident at her, but she whacks the end away with a meaty suction-covered limb, jarring my arms all the way up to my shoulders.

I gasp, but then immediately clamp my mouth shut. She's much too strong. A single appendage alone could crush me.

The Sea Witch touches down on the cavern floor with a gigantic plop, exploding a squirt of ink. I grimace as she scuttles along, using her tentacles to move her bulbous form.

Ugh.

Then I notice. Her nexus scale is missing, her sternum bleeding between two bouncing bosoms that must have grown and sagged with her shift to a cecaelia demon. Ew.

As I squint and work to control my grimace, I notice a rear sucker clutching the ridged, pulsing scale. She must plan to hold on to it, to use her magic to reattach it.

I smirk. For now, she's trapped in this revolting form, then.

And powerless.

Well, powerless enough without her nexus scale.

She seems to be wheezing. Did Draven wound her when she wasn't completely shifted? Maybe her internal anatomy hasn't adjusted to her cecaelia form.

The Sea Witch doesn't seem to notice my scrutiny. *Just how much do you love daddy dearest?* she hums as she bats thick eyelashes. *He may have raised you, but he's not even your father. Has this knowledge tarnished your admiration of the great Sea King?*

She roughly scoops Daddy's broad body up with a tentacle. He's battered but still large and imposing, and yet her tentacle just slid under him so she can so carelessly manhandle him as if he's nothing.

His limp body flops around until the Sea Witch wraps a spare tentacle around his throat. As she draws his back against her slippery body, I notice just how exposed her lower parts are, covered in soft, flexible hide without scales. Strong but

vulnerable.

It's a trade off I would never want.

You won't confuse me with your lies, I say as I study her movements for an opening, but with Daddy against her chest, I can't very well impale her.

I think she knows this.

The Sea Witch smooths a palm over his chest, pausing to play around his nexus scale wound. *Your father and I were once so very much in love.*

I glare at her. *It's a shame you betrayed him.*

Her tentacles tighten around his throat. *He betrayed me.* She releases Daddy's neck and lets him dangle but keeps her grip around his waist.

I watch as a single tentacle slithers forward and curls around Draven's bare feet. The Sea Witch then drags Draven along the sharp rock, his head and backside bumping along, before finally gathering him up. *Soon, daughter, he will awaken, and he'll need a siren's kiss.* She giggles and swishes her hips, and then makes kissy lips.

I scowl at her as wisps of Draven's precious blood flit off with the swish of water. He's not going to like waking up all bruised and falling apart again.

He's going to kill me!

She coils Draven's lifeless body up in several of her tentacles and pulls him to her chest as if he's a rag doll. With another tentacle, she wraps it around his chin, framing his face. *So like his father, don't you think?*

I wouldn't know. I've never met him.

Hmm, that's right. How heartbreaking it is that you've never met your father.

That remains to be determined. *You sure like to talk. The way I see it, it's just you and me, Mother dearest. Your minions have fled. No one is coming to help you no matter how long you stall.*

Stall? She cackles. *Stall? I am simply relishing this time together.*

I snort. *Put the king and the prince down, and let's have at each other like mother and daughter.* I advance on her.

I will give you a choice! she exclaims, her voice sharp.

This makes me halt. I roll my eyes as I answer her. *Really now? What choice?*

Of whom should be my king. Draven, the stepson I've always adored, or the infallible Sea King.

I flinch back. *Ugh. You disgust me. That's not a choice. Neither of them would want you either.*

You choose. One to be my king, the other to meet his death.

I flinch threateningly toward her, but she slithers back. *I can't make a choice like that.*

Should you like Draven as your king to rule Soundless Shores by your side?

He's my brother.

The Sea Witch pensively touches her chin. *That's right. Your "brother." You can rule as brother and sister, then. He does care for you so dearly. He can have no objection.*

I bare my sharp teeth and hiss.

She smiles, a brow raised. *So you've made your choice?* One of her tentacles returns to Daddy's neck and tightens until his face reddens.

I lift a hand. *No!*

Her hold on the Sea King loosens. *So I am to have Nereus? You would wish us a happy reunion?*

No!

Make up your mind, princess. Is Draven to be mine, then? The Sea Witch presses a palm to his chest between fat coils of her tentacles. *How glorious.*

I would never subject him to such a fate.

Draven twitches, and a bubble of water slips from his mouth.

We could just wait and ask him who he'd prefer, his sister or his stepmother. The Sea Witch nuzzles his cheek with her nose.

I hold back my revulsion, refrain from gagging. Her eyes are closed for just a second, when a deep voice speaks to me.

Leira. It's Daddy's voice, but his body is still lifeless.

Daddy? I gather he's faking unconsciousness.

Strike when Draven stirs. I'll move when he does, which will distract her, giving you an opening. Aim right for her heart.

Okay. I tighten my grip on the trident.

The Sea Witch is cooing to Draven and stroking his hair as if he's her precious pet all while her available tentacles are moving her along the floor, continuously out of my reach. I dart forward only to have her sidle smoothly away. The room is huge and cavernous. The only things to provide obstacles are the bodies and the Lunaris Orb, so we could play this game awhile.

Remembering how Draven's spirit is tethered to his body no matter his undead state, I figure he's catching the show and is ready to vomit.

He's probably wondering why I'm hesitating.

It's not as easy as that, brother dear, I say as if he can hear me. Daddy's right. I need to wait for the right moment, their distraction.

I throw a few ill-timed jabs to make the Sea Witch reverse course and stop fondling Draven. We're moving steadily now, the witch carelessly floating her hostages along while I watch for the instant Draven's eyes pop open.

Draven? Are you awake? Draven? Come on!

Hold steady, Leira, Daddy says. *You can do this.*

I don't have my bladefiend's precision. I can't influence the tide of the ocean or call a storm. There are no beasts to command. Or shadows to throw at dusk. Or a need to craft the elements.

This is all me, and the trident that hums in my grip. Forged by some powerful iron mages, from my tear and Draven's fang.

I cannot let them down.

Draven jerks, and his eyes fly open.

The Sea Witch gasps with delight just as Daddy twists and grabs one of her arms. She's shifting Draven through the water, bringing him up like a shield.

Leira, now! Daddy shouts.

I don't think. I follow his command. My arm lifts automatically as I drive the trident forward with a forceful tail flick.

The Sea Witch jerks Draven into the trident's path.

With horror I watch three prongs spear him, the obsidian tip sinking into his heart.

No! I scream.

Draven belches a bubble of air as his eyes widen and round, but his hands encircle the trident's shaft.

Déjà vu. I've impaled him again!

I'm about to yank the trident from him when, with a grunt, he forces it farther into his chest and through his back.

The Sea Witch gasps as the tips sink into her hide.

Push, Leira! Draven growls. *Press harder, love!*

The Sea Witch paralyzed from pain and shock, her tentacles release Daddy and fall slack from Draven.

But he's impaled against her chest!

He can barely lift his chin to look at me. *Leira! Gore the beastie! Snap the tip off in her black heart!*

My vision darkening and my voice a silent scream, I push into Draven and the witch, but I can't seem to break the shard off into her chest with Draven in the way. The prongs are long enough, but I'm unable to get the right leverage.

His black eyes are locked on mine, even as his body has gone rigid, his grip no longer able to assist. *Love… push!*

Blood leaks from his chest as the trident tears his wounds wider.

Daddy's hands come around the shaft of the trident, staggered around mine. *You can do this, Leira, sweetheart.*

Together, we thrust the trident upward into the Sea Witch's heart. She and Draven both gasp. Then an unholy expiration of death seeps from both their mouths.

Daddy grunts as we jerk the trident abruptly, and that's when I feel the obsidian tip snap off.

A searing pain lances my chest, blinding me. I release the trident as I buckle and round over myself.

You've done good, love, I hear Draven say as his voice fades. *I couldn't be prouder…*

I fight to stay conscious through the pain. *Daddy! Help me get Draven off the trident!*

The pain in my chest is so sharp I can scarcely breathe, but Daddy draws Draven away from the lifeless Sea Witch and pulls the trident from his chest.

His blood rapidly darkens the water around us. The notes sink into my sinuses. *I have to get him to the surface. Get him blood!* I yank the cuff off his wrist and slide it onto mine. *Hold on, Draven. I'll fix you!*

Daddy helps me shift Draven into my arms. *Go, Leira. He'll be all right. He's a vampire. He may not like dying and being impaled, but he'll survive.*

I know. With a grunt as I feel a stab of chest pain, I give Daddy a quick kiss on the cheek. *I'll return. Help you restore Lunaris. I promise*. I squeeze his hand. *I love you, Daddy.*

Then I turn the inlay on the cuff and think of the black sandy beaches of Soundless Shores.

Please don't let me forget who Draven is. Please.

Chapter 34
Draven

No, Leira. Don't use the cuff. Don't use the cuff.

Helpless, I watch her fumble with the gold bobble.

I shout into her ear. *Don't use the cuff!*

Why doesn't this telepathy junk work without my body?

I shout and shout, but it's too late. Her pointy siren fingers are grappling with the inlay and bam! My spirit is sucked with my undead body through the shadows of existence.

Smack! I snap onto the beach next to my body, and Leira's tumbling with it, falling flat against my chest, her long tail fin flopping in the surf that's rolling over us.

She immediately pushes away and screams. "I killed him!" Water spews from her lungs. "He's dead!" She mashes her hands over my gaping wounds. Blood pools under and around me.

The trident went all the way through, bit. No sense trying to hold back the tide.

"I can't stop the blood! There's so much blood!"

I crouch to shake some sense into her, but my hands pass right through her, making her shiver. *Leira! It's okay. I'm right here. I swear it!*

She paws at my lifeless torso. "Oh, no. No."

I've seen a lot worse. I promise. I inspect my chest. I'm just glad the trident wasn't wood, or I'd be dust.

A vampire mate blurs up. I recognize him immediately. Gravian. "Your Highness! Your Highness!"

"I've killed him!" She grabs Gravian, and she's screaming in his face.

He braces her upper arms. "He's undead, Your Highness!" He yells right back. "He'll be fine."

This makes her pause. Her voice lowers. "Undead?"

"Prince Draven's a vampire."

Her bright orbs are wide from fright. "Vampire?"

Gravian gestures to the cuff. "It's scrambled your head. Think for a moment, Your Highness. You've just returned from Lunaris, I assume. Prince Draven looks like he took a beating. You're got your tail back, I see."

Her shoulders deflate as she nods and hiccups.

"That's right," he coos. Gravian lifts her wrist and slides the cuff off. "I'm going to take this back now. I think you'll understand when your head clears."

Leira scoops a palm of water into her mouth and inhales it. She's looking as skittish as a wild colt.

Gravian eyes her. "We're going to fix him. I promise."

I'm pacing, snarling, feeling powerless as Leira sniffles and blinks her confusion. She's going to bolt. I know it, and I'm stuck as a stupid ghostie watching the whole show.

Come on. Get me a crimson.

I whirl toward the palace. *Where's a crimson!* I shout into the ether.

Gravian whistles to get someone's attention. About bloody time.

"I set up new crimsons for the prince, Your Highness," he says. "The palace was abandoned. Some subjects have returned, thanks to your leviathan friends, so we're getting things back in order."

Thankfully someone has brains around this joint.

A young girl scurries up, sand flying. Her collar is bright red. She doesn't waste time sticking her wrist out. Gravian bites into it, and she shoves it into my mouth.

That's a good birdie. Only a matter of time before I'm cracked back into my miserable carcass. *Come on. Come on.* I bounce with impatience.

Leira's pushing back into the surf. "I should go."

No. No. Gravian, don't you let her go! I punch his pasty mug, but my fist passes right through him.

He growls and scratches his nose, grips his head. "Cut it out, Draven! I don't like the bloomin' headache that gives me!"

Stop her! I yell, for all the good it does.

Leira is blabbering on. "I need to help Daddy. Lunaris is in ruins. I must help him." Her voice is uncertain.

"You should wait, Your Highness. Prince Draven would want you to wait. He'll be awake any moment."

Gravian knows exactly what it's like to be floating beside his body and helpless. He's been a Crimson King a time or two. He can well guess my desperation.

Leira shakes her head. "The prince. He's my brother. I remember."

I drop to my knees in the surf. *I'm not. I swear I'm not.*

"He doesn't like me much. And I don't belong here."

I groan with frustration. *I like you just fine, Leira. I want you here.*

She slides far enough into the surf that it rolls over her shoulders. I scramble forward to stay with her. *Don't you dare leave, Leira. I swear. I'll—*

Gravian's forehead is furrowed. "Can you find your way back, Your Highness? Do you remember the way?"

I'm gonna use you for target practice if you let her go! I stick my fist into his chest and jam it around.

He gasps a breath. "Damn it!" His hand darts out and he grabs Leira's wrist. "He wants you to stay. Just wait, Your Highness. I know you're scared and confused, just wait for the prince to wake."

My spirit starts effervescing. The heart in my body is beating. My wounds are clotting and sealing.

Leira, love. Leira. I gaze into her watery purple eyes, taking them in, afraid this is the last I'll see of them. Scan every inch of her face, from her spray of scales raining along her temple to the reckless waterlogged locks clinging to her jaw and throat.

Oh, demons and hellfire. I freakin' love her. But she's going to leave me before I can make sure she understands.

"I'm sorry." Leira pushes back into the surf and sinks under a wave.

I barrel into the water after her, screaming. *Leira! Leira!*

A second later, I snap back into my undead body and bolt upright. I'm stiff, and my body creaks, and I struggle to my knees in the surf and soggy sand. The incoming tide pushes me back, but Gravian helps me up.

I press into the waves. "Leira! Leira! Dammit! Come on, love!" I grimace; my body's in a load of pain, my voice hoarse. "Leira!"

"She's gone, Your Highness." Gravian has the decency to look torn on my behalf.

Yeah, my behalf.

I pivot and slug his ugly mug.

Chapter 35
Leira

Sometime during the long swim back to Lunaris, my head clears.

Draven. I've left him. The stupid prince who destroyed my life.

How could I have left him?

It's fine, Leira. Totally fine.

I'll return to Lunaris and be so busy fixing everything that I'll forget about the selfish prince and his blood lust and ridiculously sexy bleached locks and rich brown eyes.

Forget about his kisses, the way his swollen busted lip fits against mine and his winces from the pain.

The disgusting way he always smells of blood and tastes of copper.

I've done disturbing things I never dreamed of doing. Drinking his blood. Cradling his desiccated corpse. Letting him drink from me.

I'm going to have nightmares.

He compelled me. Made me do things against my will.

Made me want to wear dresses!

Ugh! I won't miss him!

He's a vampire for crying out loud!

Who's missing a fang because of his sacrifice.

Don't care.

He's saved you numerous times.

I wouldn't have ever needed saving if it wasn't for him!

Put him behind you.

I pick up my pace, sailing past a school of fish, relishing once again being in the deep. The cool of the sea on my hide. The press of fathoms cradling me.

The way I don't have to worry about my hair snarling and falling limp.

My hide won't dry out and crack. That's a bonus. There's no need for me to contemplate ever returning to land.

I am a siren. This is who I am.

Draven is a vampire.

But Mavis and Travers… and the little blue bottle she made for me…

There are ways to stay. Serafina did it for years. She has those pools all over the palace and lives right on the sea.

Stop it, Leira!

Don't think of the prince.

I remind myself that every single thing he did was self-serving, to rid himself of the nuisance of the Sea Witch.

My mother.

I've never known her and now I never will.

Leira, everything he did was for his people. You know it was.

Lunaris looms ahead, nothing but empty rock and coral tombs. Sirens swim about, some with two legs, many with fins. As long as my kin don't surface and expel the water from their lungs, those who wait for their scales to regrow should be fine.

I find Daddy and my sisters. They've hauled the Sea Witch's body from the luminous cavern. A few of my sisters mourn her. Several do not. They see her as a traitor.

But she is still our mother.

I inspect her bulbous body, disgusted that we would ever take power that could shift us into a cecaelia demon's sea form.

Daddy, we can't let this ever happen again, I say. *We can't ever take powers from demons.*

He nods. Several of my sisters' mouths fall open.

Daddy! Melisande shrieks. *That idea is unreasonable. We must have the demon's powers. The yearly harvest must go on!*

My sisters nod.

I'm afraid I agree with Leira, he says. *It's time we change our ways. Prince Draven will battle us fin and scale if we continue our practice.*

I feel my face heat. My chest tightens.

Who cares about the vampire prince! Melisande shouts. *He's a walking corpse, and demons are scheming creatures. They deserve no respect from us.*

Daddy halfheartedly chuckles. *Some would say the same of sirens. We will discuss this more later. We have an audience.* He waves to a crowd that has grown and turns to address them. He straightens his shoulders, growing to his full

imposing height even though I know he's still pained from his battle. *Gather up every nexus scale you can find! We shall restore Lunaris! Bring them to the luminous cavern and we will make a new offering to the Lunaris Orb.*

What about the Abyssal Vortex? I ask. *The throne room is a whirlpool.*

When the waters recede, they will return to the magical bounds of its pool, then the power of the Lunaris Orb can dry it up. We'll fill and seal the pool so there's no temptation to return to our old ways.

I join the sirens searching for glowing nexus scales on the ocean floor. We find one for every single barren sternum, and we reverently harvest the scales from those who have fallen before returning our beloved kin to the sea with our siren song.

One by one, their bodies shimmer as our songs embrace them. One by one, magic wraps them until they disappear in a swirl of bubbles and light.

As for the Sea Witch, Daddy seals her carcass in a stone vault for her body to bloat and slowly rot.

Three days later, our kin gather in the luminous cavern, each siren with a nexus scale in one hand and a new scale grown over their hearts. Starting with Daddy, he offers his fallen scale to the orb.

The magic absorbs the power as if the orb is hungry.

Daddy then sticks his hands into the lumpy orb, exactly as he coached me to. His new sternal scale takes the magic from the old, lighting his chest up.

Daddy visibly sighs. And not one to be shy, he transforms from his two legs back into his glorious tail.

My kin applaud.

Next, I deposit my scale, the one ripped from me that started this whole downfall. I don't need power returned to my scale, so I swish away and allow another siren to come forth.

With each scale offered, the orb brightens and swells, and then, as power is returned to those sirens without, it shrinks a little.

When all the nexus scales are returned and all of us are basking in our fins, the poor Lunaris Orb is still just a fragment of its former might.

It will take time for it to become strong once again. For now, we let it heal before we call it to push back the sea.

Chapter 36
Leira

I pat Luciathan's maw before he slinks back beyond the peninsula's underwater shelf, where the sea drops off and becomes as dark as night.

He comes with me to the shore. We swim the long leagues together every few days just for me to arrive as the sun dips below the horizon.

Because I'm waiting for the prince.

Just to catch a glimpse of my forbidden brother.

Prince Draven's on the shore every night that I'm here skulking on a jagged outcrop, lying in the darkness where he can't see me, where the waves pound over me, telling me they sympathize with my shattered heart.

And there he is again; his stupid platinum hair beckons in the moonlight, his pale, fragile skin tells me he hasn't drunk enough blood tonight.

What a baby.

Why can't he just get on with his life? Why does he have to mope about and make me feel guilty?

I can't come back to you. I can't. Lunaris is my home.

The Lunaris Orb has grown in strength. Our kingdom is slowly expanding to its former bounds and drying out.

My kin have argued with the Sea King about taking new powers, but he forbids it. His command has become law.

He even told me that he met with Draven, that they signed a binding contract. No one siren is to harm a demon or vampire, let alone bring him back under thrall to our sea kingdom. The penalties are severe for those who disobey it.

I gasped with dismay and a broken heart when Daddy told me he had been to shore.

I didn't have the heart to ask him how Draven was.

I haven't had the heart to ask him what he thinks of King Asmodear's daughter.

I fight the congestion filling my sinuses. Since that night in Mavis's garden, crying has come easily, and I hate myself for it.

The current stirs oddly beside the rock, and then out pops a siren with bold copper tresses.

I rear back as he clings to the front of the rock. "Daddy!" I grab my heart, the pain that torments me since stabbing the Sea Witch intensified by the shock. "What are you doing here?"

Most days the pain is a dull, continuous ache, but strong emotion seems to swell the daily reminder of what Draven and I sacrificed.

King Nereus grins up at me as he clutches the outcropping, the waves washing against him, stirring his noble tail. "Leira, dearest, I thought I'd catch a swim with my favorite daughter. The night is perfect for one."

At this the tears immediately spill over, and I curl up on the rock, drawing my fins to my chest and dabbing at my eyes with the feathery ends. "How can you say that?"

"Say what? That you're my favorite?" He gets a twinkle in his eyes and touches his lips with a single finger. "Shh. Don't tell your sisters."

I smack the rock on either side of me. "That I'm your daughter!"

Daddy hoists himself onto the rock and draws me into his arms. "Why wouldn't I say that?" He swipes a beady tear from my cheek and holds it up. It morphs into a tiny glowing insect that jumps into the sky and buzzes away.

"I know the truth, that I'm King Asmodear's daughter."

"Oh, do you now? Would it surprise you to know that your mother didn't know the truth, that she only told you what she thought she knew because she had been deceived."

"What?"

"That night over sixteen years ago, I glamoured myself to look like Asmodear. I came to Serafina while she was ashore and waiting for the king. I had to find out for myself the depths of her love for him and her betrayal."

I sniffle. "What? No. You did?"

"Yes, my dearest, my most precious gift. I call you that because you were our last, and you just barely came to me in time. I would have never seen you had Serafina given birth to you on shore. She would have made sure of that because, in her heart, she believed you to be Asmodear's."

I blink through my tears. "So I really am your daughter?"

"Really."

My heart pounding from emotion, from relief, I throw my arms around Daddy's broad shoulders.

He gives me a crushing hug in return. "Have you ever doubted my love?"

I shake my head against his chest. "You have always been my father. I love you, Daddy."

His chest rumbles with subtle laughter. "But your true concern is for the vampire prince on shore."

I push my bottom lip out and shake my head again.

Daddy chuckles and lifts my face. “Come on now, Leira. I may be an old grumpy sea king, but I know when my daughter’s in love.”

I press a palm over my mouth and squeeze my eyes shut as tears stream down my face.

“He’s not your brother,” Daddy says with somberness, emphasizing his point as if I somehow missed it.

I bob my head.

His voice becomes thoughtful. “I noticed something while visiting the prince. I saw that your mother had the palace fitted with pools. And you know what else I saw while I was there?”

I wag my head.

“Piles of dirt just sitting on the terrace. I asked Prince Draven if he had a purpose for the mounds of earth. He shrugged and said he hadn’t made his mind up yet, muttered that he was waiting for some stubborn witch to have an epiphany.”

I giggle. “What?”

“He’s waiting for you, dearest, and he’s a good man”—he winces—“er, vampire, and I don’t *hate* him.” Daddy turns and looks to the shore. “Look at him. Rather pathetic, huh, daughter?” Daddy chortles. “You should probably put him out of misery one way or the other.”

Draven’s sitting on the beach, right at the water, never minding the waves soaking him.

“I know you want to stay.” Daddy presses a palm over my nexus scale. “You will have your nexus scale to return and visit as often as you want. And you should probably let Luciathan get back to his stand-up instead of having him patrol the shores.”

I make an exaggerated eye roll. “The stupid prince keeps drowning. I sent Luciathan up here for Draven’s own good.”

“I gathered that. But tell me once and for all, daughter, do you love him?”

Pain stabs my chest, and my hand flinches as if it wants to go to it and dig the imaginary sliver out.

But I know it will do no good.

“With all my heart,” I finally whisper.

“Then you have my blessing.”

I hug Daddy once again, and this time his tears fall. When they land on the salty, wet rock, they sprout into tiny white flowers.

Chapter 37
Draven

"Your Majesty," Gravian asks, "are we filling in the pools today?"

I shoot a deadly glare at the heap of rubble lounging on the terrace. Been sitting there for ages, rocks and dirt, but I can't muster the guts to command the destruction of the palace pools Serafina loved.

'Cause what if Leira comes back and needs to keep her hide damp?

No. *When* Leira comes back.

You keep telling yourself that, you git.

I hiss and twist the daylight ring on my finger. "Don't bloody ask me that again or I'll feed you to a flagenas demon."

Gravian throws his hands up in surrender. "Fine, fine, Your Majesty."

Still sporting that blasted shadow cuff, he is. He thinks he's used to its side effects but won't let me have another crack at it to find Leira. Worries Lunaris is still a bloomin' aquarium, and the disorientation would be off the charts if I surfaced under the sea with no bearings and no air.

It's not as if sirens are clamoring my shores to give me a juicy peck so I can swim there myself!

It's not as if one particular siren is skulking along my shores and even climbing the cliff to my palace—or my bed.

She's bleedin' gone, acting as if she never gave a toss about me.

I kick at a loose stone, sending it slamming into a bit of the palace wall that's crumbling and could use some patching up.

Wheeling around, I growl. "I'll be down at the beach."

"It's not as if she's just going to turn up!" Gravian yells after me. "And that big beastie is not going to take you."

I saunter down to the beach, hands jammed deep into my pockets. The night, all cloudy and misty, sets the mood just right. I yank off my boots and chuck them at a dune. Then, my leather trench follows suit, hitting the sand with a thud, before I continue over the coarse sand down to the shore.

When my toes hit the damp grains, I sink to the beach and draw my knees up to my chest and tuck my face against them.

The waves roar, and the surf touches my toes, but no matter how high the waves crest and crash, no matter what storm rolls in, nothing drowns out the haunting song in my mind.

The blasted Sea King was right.

I've been cursed with Leira warbling off key in my noggin.

My only respite comes from diving deep, holding my breath till I black out. It's the only time the racket stops.

I've even had a go at swimming to Lunaris, more times than I can count.

And each time, I end up fish food.

That blasted leviathan's got it out for me, dragging me back onto the shore like a washed-up piece of rubbish.

I swear Leira put him up to it, patrolling to keep me from reaching the sea kingdom, even if I could outlast a whale underwater.

Bloody hell, he's out there lurking again, just waiting for me to make a move.

I pick up a handful of sand and chuck it at the sea. "I bloody well know you're there, you big dumb beastie!"

As if Luciathan has impeccable hearing or just remarkable timing, he launches from the depths and belly-flops as if it's some grand performance.

"Show off!" I yell.

I flop back into the sand and stare at the clouds above me. The moon's playing peekaboo with them, shifting objects from silver to black.

Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah.

Not this again.

"Dammit, Leira!" I roll onto my stomach and push to my hands and knees. As her screaming tune intensifies, I punch the sand. "If you aren't coming back to me, leave me in peace, witch!"

Oooh, O, aah. Oooh, O, aah—

I leap up, charging into the surf, hollering until I can't see straight. "I don't want your bloody siren song! Take it back, witch!"

A wave socks me, plastering my shirt to my chest, and I wobble.

Oooh, O, lah. Oooh, O, lah. Ooh, lah. Aah, O, lah. Aaah, O, lah. Aaah, oooh, O, lah.

Tears stream down my face from the ire I'm stuffed with. I clap my palms against the waves. "Cork it!"

"Sovereign of shadows, hear my song," a voice sings, practically right under my nose.

I startle so badly I trip back and fall with a splash. A wave tumbles over me, and I'm hacking and wheezing, and my lungs are burning as I struggle to get my head above water.

"Under shifting tides and light of moon I come, seeking end to restless drums."

Her voice is liquid moonlight spearing my core.

I'm scrambling now, hauling myself up. "Don't play with me, bit!" I bend over my knees and cough more water from my lungs. "Show yourself, Leira! Stop taunting me!"

It's bad enough I wake in a dripping sweat most days from nightmares that Leira's swapped places with her mom.

Ruling with an iron trident, a blood-red collar choking the life out of me, my missing fang dangling on a chain around her throat like some sick trophy.

"I'd have just delightful dreams if I didn't have your tune warping my brain!"

I look up then in time to see an inky mane and round peepers just above the toss of the waves. Her chin lifts, seawater cascading from her mouth as she belts out her eerie tune once again. "A phantom in the night I glide, through chilling dreams my love does hide."

Like hell it does.

I'm torn, paralyzed from indecision. I long to run to her, the ache is so dang strong, but the sheer relief of seeing her again leaves me rooted.

I fall to my knees, my eyes riveted on hers, and allow the surf to roll over my lap.

My siren rises like a haunting melody, her teasing swells just visible, her words dripping with longing and mystery as she surges closer on a cresting wave.

"Listen close, my vampire prince, to the songs that have not ceased since. Through mist and fog, I've found my way, to shores where shadows and moonlight play."

I catch a glimpse of her tail, gauzy and sensual, sexy as hell, steering her closer.

Massive pain fills my chest from my miserable heart hammering my ribs, but a grin forces its way onto my face.

She bats her long blue lashes. "With every crest, with every swell, my heart beats out the tale I tell."

A wave pitches up under her, pushing her forward with reckless miscalculation.

Leira slams into me, and we go sliding up the beach. She spews a lungful of water into my face, leaving me sputtering as she collapses against me.

The long length of her tail presses me into the sand. Her hair's once again a mess, clinging to my face and her shoulders like suction cups.

Right disaster she is.

She groans into my ear, and I can't help but shiver.

I chuckle. "Didn't fancy a grand entrance, yeah, bit?" Even though I'm still reeling from her sudden appearance and my noggin scrambled from her siren song, my hands find her and wrap around her cold body. My fingertips run along the spread of scales on her bare back, and I swallow, my throat unexpectedly dry from wanting and thirst.

My single fang lengthens through my gums, and suddenly I've got Leira in my sights with my vampy vision all tuned up.

And her smell, oh, that unmistakable scent of hers—dead fish and salty locks—it's enough to make me smirk right past my fang. But there's a twist, something new, something exotic in the mix.

Hibiscus? Really?

"Did you try to make yourself all fancy smellin' now, love? For me?"

"It isn't easy," she said. "But one of my sisters has an enchanted perfume that works under the sea."

"I see." I try shifting my weight under her, but my little fishie maiden with her fishie muscle isn't light.

"Hold just a second, Draven." Her body draws tight as she presses her face into the crook of my neck and shoulder. I hold back a groan when her breath warms my skin.

She lets out a tortured roar that has me bristling.

Then something in her lower half cracks and shifts.

And rips.

Rips?

My head jerks up, but she's pinning me in the cage of her arms. "Leira!"

Her tail splits. I feel the sickening crawl over my own legs as hers reform, and back and hip fins disintegrate. Leira's head rears up, and there's a flash of her jagged chompers.

"Love, love!" I try gripping her shoulders.

Her head flops forward, and she clamps down on my shoulder, her teeth sinking deeply.

I howl, and for a mite I'm thinking I deserve this rough salutation.

But then, as her talons sink into my biceps, a peculiar sensation washes like a wave over me.

This is no punishment.

This is necessary. Wanted.

"Ah, bloody—" I groan. So wanted.

Utter and complete contentment fills me. A wholeness.

And silence.

Her tune is gone from my head.

And then I know—Leira and I are synced up and locked in.

Locked.

"You gutsy sea wench!" I exclaim as her teeth slide from my flesh and her face lifts to look into mine. Her mouth's covered in my gore. "You've gone and done a naughty thing, love." My tongue flicks over my fang, hunger pounding through me.

I'm going to bite her.

Taste her.

She chews on her pouty lip. "You want me to take it back, grumpy baby prince?"

I smirk. "*King*, love. Been crowned for some time, but you would know that if you got the message I gave Luciathan. You were invited."

She huffs a breath as she toys with my wet chest hair in the vee of my shirt. "Oh, I've bruised the bigheaded king-baby's fragile ego."

I grab her wrist, making her hand stop. "Oi, princess with an attitude." I hiss at her and bare my fang. "You're skatin' on thin ice."

She snaps her teeth, to which I arch up to nip her lip.

My siren seizes my jaw with an iron grip. This has me puzzled until she lifts my lip and prods with a sharp talon the place where my fang used to be. "A tooth grew in."

"I told you it would," I say around her finger in my mouth.

She presses her lips together and fumes as she pokes the point of my remaining fang. Then she blows out a huff of air.

I roll my eyes. "You done, now, love?"

She yanks her hand back as if she didn't realize what she was doing.

My hand sweeps along her cheek. "It's fine. You couldn't love me any less."

"Love? Who says I love you?"

"You bit me! That's a declaration, pet, you know that, right?" The icy water swirling around us might dull the sting of my bite, but I'm not about to ignore its significance.

She marked me.

I'm her vamp.

Her partner.

And the unexpected ire in her eyes is worth pretending I'm daft.

She scowls, all fiery and fierce. "You're as dense as a rock! You don't think I know what I just did?" She attempts to twist free, but I've got her arms locked tight. "Draven!" She struggles to break loose, looming over me. "Release me!"

"You gonna keep fighting me? Are we back to our old games? 'Cause I don't want my queen quarrelin' with me every time the sun goes down."

She halts, piercing me with her glare. "Your queen?"

"Yeah. Don't like the sound of that?"

"Your queen doesn't appreciate feeling like a fool. You can't mock me in front of our court."

"You're right. I won't." I grin then. "Our court?"

She wriggles her nose. "Yes. I'm their queen."

"You're *my* queen," I growl, laying it on thick. I reach for her, aiming to steal a taste of those wet lips, but she hesitates.

"There are a lot of things we have to figure out," she says, holding me off.

My head drops back, and I groan. "All in time, bit, yeah?"

Her legs shift over mine, and she winces.

"You all right, love?"

"Yeah." She presses a palm over her sternum. "It just feels as if I've swallowed a puffer fish."

"A puffer fish?"

"Since I stabbed the Sea Witch with the trident."

My eyes round. "You took the price." I swear under my breath. "Leira. I'm sorry. I forgot." I brush my palm along her cheek.

With her eyes squeezed tight, she shakes her head against my touch. "Forget it. It had to be done."

I push her back then with such vamp haste she gasps. She's pinned under me, her hair spread out like sunrays, her little chest heaving. I drag my black vampy nails down her throat and, with a pointed finger, trace along her jugular to her sternum and around her nexus scale.

If I'm not mistaken, she trembles.

I glance into her face. "You know I would never hurt you." I give her a teasing smolder. "That is, bit, not without your permission."

“I know.” Her words are breathy, quivering.

I bow my head and kiss her nexus scale, run my nose along her sternum just above it as I whisper kisses along her throat. “I will always protect you, stepsister.”

She draws a sharp intake of breath. “So you know.”

“Yeah. I knew all along.” I graze my fang along her bulging vein. “We aren’t related by blood. Never would have thought it if the witch hadn’t suggested it.”

Leira jerks my face up so our eyes meet. “So this is okay? You’re okay with this?”

“If you’re fine with an undead beastie for a mate.” I lick the salt from her damp jaw, ignoring the gravelly edge to my voice.

Her chin bobs against me as she sinks her talons into my hair and along my scalp.

“Leira, love,” I mutter into her ear. She tightens her grip on my hair roots, and I pause with a groan before I can barely grind the words out. “I’m going to taste you, devour you, you little temptress. Take you as mine.”

I tease her thick hide and pulsing vein with my fang, waiting for her approval, tightening my hips over hers, twining our legs together, the chill of the sea binding us.

Leira’s head angles for my bite.

I nip her earlobe. “You ready for this, bit? The venom is going to make you wild.”

She wriggles under me, impatient. “Yes, Draven.”

With the fiery determination to claim her as much as she’s claimed me, I plunge my fang into her defiant skin. It’s not just about sealing our bond; it’s about the rush of ecstasy coursing through me with every craving gasp she lets out. I withdraw my fang, and her blood floods my mouth, my senses, electrifying every part of me.

I let out a groan and swallow. As our lips clash once more, it hits me—lost in the twisted dance of the sea and shadows on the shore, with eerie tunes echoing through the night and waves crashing, this is it—everything I didn’t know I wanted, besides my crew free and Serafina six feet under the seabed.

But I know, without a doubt and without a siren song to muddle me, I’ve bloody well stumbled upon my very own sanctum in the arms of this feisty little siren.

Thank You

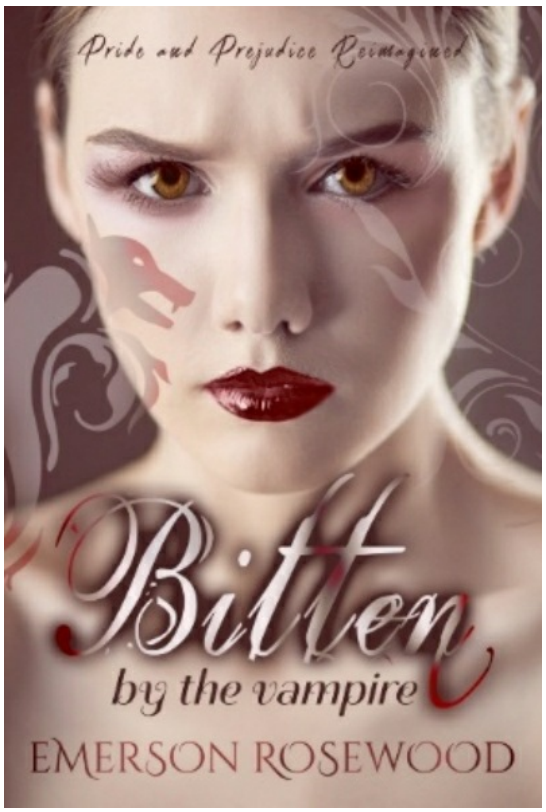
Thank you for reading *Crimson Collar*, The Little Mermaid Reimagined, by Emerson Rosewood. You may also enjoy other authors under the Everly Reads umbrella: E.E. Everly and Reina Lockwood. Be sure to check them out for maximum escapism.

If you loved this story, please share your enthusiasm with family and friends. Leaving a review on your favorite retailer, blog, book-focused website, or social media is an excellent way to support an author. A five-star review means you think others should devour this book now!

Thanks for reading.

What to Read Next

Another reimagined tale…



Bitten by the Vampire by Emerson Rosewood

Another Great Read

If you like vampires and storm sprites…

My Vampire by E.E. Everly

Stay Connected

Do you love romance and several of its subgenres, including fantasy, urban, paranormal, Victorian suspense, Regency, sweet, and slow-burn upper YA?

Everly Reads has the romance you crave. Among our favorites are vampire romances and E.E. Everly's enchanting worlds inhabited by immortal fae-like beings.

If this piques your interest, subscribe to our newsletter today and stay up-to-date with our latest releases. Everly Reads proudly encompasses works by authors E.E. Everly, Reina Lockwood, and Emerson Rosewood.

SUBSCRIBE NOW!

Bonus! Get E.E. Everly's short story collection, *End With a Kiss*, for free! Look for the link in our welcome newsletter!

Discover More from Everly Reads

E.E. EVERLY

brooding. feisty. epic.

The Emrys Chronicles
Consumed
Betrayed
Scorned

Fallen Emrys Chronicles
Corrupted
Haunted

Lost Emrys Chronicles
Shattered
Scourged

My Supernatural Boyfriend
My Vampire
My Storm Sprite

A Novel Love
Writing with Julie L. Spencer
A Novel Proposal
A Novel Mystery
Senator's Son

Reindeer Run
I'd Rather Sniff a Reindeer Than Kiss You
I'd Rather Ingest Mistletoe Than Kiss You
I'd Rather Chug Eggnog Than Kiss You
I'd Rather Stroke a Pinecone Than Kiss You
I'd Rather Be Stuck in a Blizzard Than Kiss You

Standalone Novels
Heavy Without You
Switching Lives
Bidden by the Vampire

Short Stories
Taming the Wolf
Rooftop Suitor
Hidden in Silence
Kiss of Life
Reflected Realms

The Full Short-story Collection
Available exclusively to newsletter subscribers
End With a Kiss

EMERSON ROSEWOOD

enchanting. ethereal. unreal.

Bitten by the Vampire: Pride and Prejudice Reimagined
Crimson Collar: The Little Mermaid Reimagined

REINA LOCKWOOD

turbulent. soul searing. wicked.

My Not So Secret Crushes
Knights of Frost and Rain
Lady of Ravens and Ruin
Princess of Secrets and Sirens
Lords of Storms and Chaos
Princes of Dreams and Echoes
Kings of Tempest and Tides
Queen of Embers and Ashes

About the Author

Emerson Rosewood once frolicked under a foreboding blood moon, discovering for herself that love should be enchanting, ethereal, and unreal. In her stories, the heroines fight to slay their mundane existences, and the guys torment the poor girls with brooding looks and desperate kisses. Emerson loves and believes in epic romances with touches of fairy-tale magic, fangs, and hints of the impossible.